

INTRODUCTION

WHEN STALIN WANTED TO TEMPORIZE IN DEALING WITH FOREIGNERS, he sometimes indicated that the problem would be getting it past his Politburo. This was taken as a fiction, since the diplomats assumed, correctly, that the final decision was his. But that doesn't mean that there wasn't a Politburo that he consulted or a team of colleagues he worked with. That team—about a dozen persons at any given time, all men—came into existence in the 1920s, fought the Opposition teams headed by Lev Trotsky and Grigory Zinoviev after Lenin's death, and stayed together, remarkably, for three decades, showing a phoenixlike capacity to survive team-threatening situations like the Great Purges, the paranoia of Stalin's last years, and the perils of the post-Stalin transition. Thirty years is a long time to stay together in politics, even in a less lethal political climate than that of the Soviet Union under Stalin. The team finally disbanded in 1957, when one member (Nikita Khrushchev) made himself the new top boss and got rid of the rest of them.

I've used the term "team" (in Russian, *komanda*) for the leadership group around Stalin. At least one other scholar has also used this term, but alternatives are available. You could call it a "gang" (*shaika*) if you wanted to claim that its activities—ruling the country—had an illegitimate quality that made them essentially criminal rather than governmental. You could call it "the Politburo" (that is, the executive organ of the Communist Party's Central Committee, elected by periodic party congresses), which is semicorrect since the membership was very similar but, owing to Stalin's preference for informal working groups, never quite the same. Or you could call it a "faction," another pejorative term in Soviet discourse. The reader who prefers "gang" or one of the other alterna-

tives is welcome to make the mental substitution. It was, in any case, a collective entity whose members had individual responsibilities but met regularly as a group, and who were united by loyalty to Stalin and, initially, to one another. Formed to fight other teams competing for leadership after Lenin's death, its function shifted with victory into governing the country.¹

Like most teams, this one had a captain, Joseph Stalin, a figure of great authority over the others, who might also be described as a playing coach. His prerogatives in practice, though this was nowhere written down, included the politically crucial power of selecting and dismissing the other players on the team. In the early years, most of the team addressed Stalin, as well as one another, by the familiar form *ty*, and the convention was that he was just the first among equals. But the reality that he was more than that was increasingly visible, and by the postwar period only a couple of old hands were still using the familiar form with Stalin. It was a team apparently defined by its leader—Stalin's team (*stalinskaia komanda*)—which, when he died, managed something nobody expected, namely, to function as a leadership team without him.

In the scholarly world, where Stalin has long existed as a singular subject of political biography, the introduction of a team may be wrongly understood to imply a claim that Stalin's power was less than has been supposed. This is not what I am arguing. Indeed, in researching the book, I was struck by how great his authority was with the rest of the team, and how unchallenged his preeminence, even when circumstances seemed to call for a challenge, as in June 1941. The big policy initiatives were his, while the team's contributions (often hard to ascertain exactly, since the convention was to attribute *all* initiative to Stalin) were generally in their fields of particular expertise and institutional responsibility, on issues that Stalin considered secondary. But the fact is that, unchallenged top dog though he was, Stalin preferred—as his contemporaries Mussolini and Hitler did not—to operate with a group of powerful figures around him, loyal to him personally but also operating as a team. These men were not competitors with him for leadership, but neither were they political non-entities or simply “entourage,” like his secretaries or secret policemen. They ran important sectors like the military, railways, and heavy industry, often with great competence. They were advocates within the Politburo for whatever institutions they headed at any given time. Most important

policy issues were discussed by them (and Stalin) as a group in their frequent formal and informal meetings. Stalin did not need their agreement for his initiatives, but when he sensed it was lacking or lukewarm, he sometimes backed off or simply (for example, in cases of political outcasting) waited for them to come around.

There were changes in the team's composition over the thirty years. Three members (Sergei Kirov, Valerian Kuibyshev, and Sergo Ordzhonikidze) died in the mid-1930s, and another (Mikhail Kalinin) just after the war. Four new recruits (Andrei Zhdanov, Khrushchev, Georgy Malenkov, and Lavrenty Beria) joined the team in the second half of the 1930s. The Great Purges removed some marginal members, notably, three working in Ukraine (Stanislav Kosior, Vlas Chubar, and Pavel Postyshev), and after the war, the Leningrad Affair claimed a fast-rising recent recruit (Nikolai Voznesensky). But a core group—Vyacheslav Molotov, Lazar Kaganovich, Anastas Mikoyan, Klim Voroshilov, and, until 1952, Andrei Andreev—remained constant, and it was this group, together with the 1930s recruits, who constituted the team (“collective leadership”) that took over upon Stalin's death.

The extent of the team members' powers of independent action in their own spheres varied over time, as did the degree to which they felt themselves a collective rather than simply a band of rivals. Interestingly enough, the two variables tended to move together and in the same direction. Both independence and team spirit were high in the early 1930s, and both were much reduced in the late 1930s as a result of the Great Purges. They rose again during the war, and remained high, though in a perilous context, in the postwar period until Stalin's death in 1953. The last period is particularly interesting in that Stalin was then at his most volatile and suspicious of his colleagues, but at the same time was no longer capable of continuing the huge workload of earlier years. He could still make initiatives that the rest of the team had to go along with (such as the anti-Semitic campaign of the late 1940s and early 1950s), but in matters he hadn't tagged as his own, the team members were working *around* him as much as with him by the end. When he wanted to drop Vyacheslav Molotov (long his no. 2 man) and another old-timer, Anastas Mikoyan, from the team in October 1952, the rest of the team resisted. He couldn't even stop the two in disgrace from showing up uninvited at his dacha, because the other team members were tipping them off.

How this struggle would have ended up is unknowable, because at the crucial point, Stalin died. Not surprisingly, under the circumstances, rumors circulated that his death was helped along, but nobody has ever been able to prove it. His death probably saved the lives of Molotov and Mikoyan, and perhaps security chief Lavrenty Beria and the others, too. Even before the leader had breathed his last breath, the team had their post-Stalin collective leadership up and running. The Stalin team, it turned out, could manage quite well—indeed, compared to the last few years of Stalin's life, substantially better—without Stalin. Everyone had predicted anarchy when Stalin died, and the team themselves feared it, but they actually carried out a successful transition with minimal (in Soviet terms) loss of life and a remarkably wide-ranging and radical reform program. The fact that reforms were initiated immediately strongly suggests that an unspoken consensus on the desirability of change, combined with recognition of its nonfeasibility as long as Stalin was around, had developed in the team in the years *before* Stalin's death.

My subtitle is “The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics,” and danger is a crucial aspect of the story. The team as a whole was in danger at the beginning of the 1930s, when the reckless and wildly ambitious combination of collectivization of peasant agriculture and forced-pace industrialization could have ended in disaster. The Great Purges of the late 1930s was another high danger point, both for Stalin (since the terror could have got out of control and turned on its initiator) and the team members, perpetrators along with Stalin but constantly reminded they could become victims. In fact, most of the core team survived, politically as well as physically: Stalin proved to be a loyal patron to them, though with relatives and trusted subordinates dropping like flies around them, they couldn't be sure of that in advance. Fear of Stalin was not the only thing that held the team together, but it was certainly never absent after the early years.²

The team, the regime, and the country were at risk during the Second World War, with two and a half years of almost uninterrupted defeats and retreats until the tide turned in the winter of 1942–43. In what should have been triumphant years of victory after the war, individual members of the team were again in danger. In the post-Stalin transition, the team quickly eliminated one member, Beria, because of his evident ambition and disdain for collective rule, as well as out of fear, because he was thought to

have compromising files on them. Otherwise, the team remained more or less intact until 1957, when Khrushchev was the one whose ambition and noncollegiality led the others to try to rein him in—a plan that misfired and led to the ousting of Molotov, Kaganovich, and Malenkov, and, effectively, the end of the Stalin team. But the age of living dangerously in Soviet politics was already over by 1957. Neither side in that conflict thought of arresting or killing its rivals but simply of removing them from power.

The idea of writing this book came to me in the early 1990s, when the Stalin archive (*fond Stalina* in RGASPI, successor to the old party Central Committee archive) first opened, disclosing a large amount of correspondence between Stalin and other team members. The subject was initially going to be just Stalin and Molotov, Molotov being vice-captain and Stalin's alter ego for much of the period under discussion, but then I became conscious of the team dimension. This occurred to me in the context of another archival research project in which I encountered team member Sergo Ordzhonikidze not only running heavy industry with entrepreneurial flair and initiative but also vigorously representing the industrial interest in the Politburo—which made me realize that this was how the Politburo must have operated. In addition, I had always felt that there was a book to write about Soviet high politics that put political science models aside and focused on individuals and their interactions, my sense of which was based on the vivid personal portraits my Soviet friend and mentor Igor Sats, who had known most of the party leaders in his capacity as secretary to a People's Commissar (minister) in the 1920s, painted for me in our conversations in the late 1960s.³

With the Soviet party and government (but not secret police) archives opened, rich collections of papers of most of the leaders—Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich, Mikoyan, Malenkov, Voroshilov, Ordzhonikidze, Kalinin, Kirov, Andreev, and Voznesensky—became available. Khrushchev was a partial exception in the 1990s because of his awkward status as a deposed leader, while Beria, the team member who was shot in 1953, was and remains archivally inaccessible. Since the 1990s, many Stalin biographies and publications of source materials have been helpful to me in writing this book. One of them, Simon Sebag Montefiore's lively biography, shares my interest in the milieu in which Stalin lived, though not specifically the political team in which he played. There have been fine scholarly studies of Stalin's political "inner circle" by the Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk,

whose knowledge of the sources is unequalled, and his British collaborator, Yoram Gorlizki, and an important quantitative analysis of the team by Stephen Wheatcroft.⁴

It is not surprising that Stalin should largely have monopolized public attention and even that of scholars, since great dictators always exert a special fascination. In the case of the Stalin team, however, there are other reasons. It was the convention within the team and in the world outside to stress *Stalin's* contributions, not anyone else's. If in the 1930s the Soviet press often wrote admiringly not just of the leader (*vozhd'*) but of the leaders (*vozhdi*), meaning the team, this changed after the war, when the team's public profile was largely restricted to flanking Stalin on the receiving stand in Red Square at May Day parades and the like. In addition, personal relations within the team had taken a sharp turn for the worse. The kind of collegial friendships that existed in the early 1930s had largely vanished by the early 1950s, partly as a result of Stalin's encouragement of mutual suspicion and animosity, and attempts to reestablish closer personal and family relations after Stalin's death were short-lived and not particularly successful.

After 1953, when Beria was executed, 1956, when Stalin was denounced, and 1957, when Khrushchev banished the rest of the team after labeling them an "anti-Party group," it was in nobody's interest to remember that they had long worked together as a team, including Beria, and with and without Stalin. Beria became the general scapegoat after his disgrace, with his former colleagues competing with one another to deny any kind of collegial, let alone friendly, contact with him in the past. With de-Stalinization in 1956, team members were anxious to distance themselves from what were now labeled as his crimes, as well as to point the finger at their colleagues. Later, when survivors, family members, and former associates started to write memoirs, they not surprisingly produced highly partial accounts focused on the one member of the team who, in their version, got things right. Stalin, and the subject's individual relationship with him, were central in these accounts, with the rest of the team playing subordinate roles and generally cast in an unflattering light. While the team members themselves acknowledged a degree of past teamwork, they did so in passing and often grudgingly, while their children ignored it almost entirely. This is not surprising, given that all these accounts were written

after the definitive and bitter breakup of the team in 1957, when Molotov, Malenkov, and Kaganovich went one way (but not together, to avoid any suggestion of plotting), and Khrushchev—with Mikoyan and a battered Voroshilov in tow—another.

After the archives opened and the memoirs were published, it became clear that, to a degree unusual among political leaders, Stalin's political and social life were intertwined. He socialized largely with the team, in their Kremlin apartments or out at his dacha. This was true in the early days of the team, when his wife Nadya was alive and he and many of his colleagues had young children, and continued after Nadya's suicide in 1932, when the team and his in-laws from two marriages provided virtually all of his social life, which focused around his dacha. He was a lonely man after Nadya's death, and even lonelier after the Great Purges broke up his surrogate family of in-laws. His daughter, Svetlana, was left for company, but that ended when she grew up and married during the war. The company of the team became all the more important to Stalin after the war, and participants have left memorable accounts of the awfulness of enforced nightly socializing at the dacha (now, in contrast to the 1930s, without wives and children) and the burden it imposed on the team.

In the old days, our picture of Stalin and his team came largely from Trotsky, who thought Stalin was a second-rate nonentity and the team worse than third-rate, hardly worth discussing. Trotsky scoffed at Molotov and lost no opportunity to ridicule and humiliate most of the others. Since Trotsky was deported from Moscow at the end of 1927, and from the Soviet Union two years later, he knew the team members very early in their careers, if at all. Clearly, he was wrong about Stalin, who, whatever he was, wasn't a nonentity or just a creature of the party machine. About the team, he was right about one thing: they weren't cosmopolitan intellectuals like him, or for that matter like Lenin. But they were far from the indistinguishable, faceless men that Trotsky, and others following him, assumed.

Stalin's closest associate, Molotov, nicknamed "stone-bottom," had a seemingly endless work capacity; nobody ever called him charismatic, but after you observe his stubborn perseverance over thirty years, you can't help but develop a certain admiration for his sheer ability to take it—not just the work but also the abuse—and his almost invariable refusal to

apologize. Ordzhonikidze, on the other hand, was charismatic, hot-tempered, and much liked by his colleagues; in charge of heavy industry in the peak years of the industrialization drive, he did a phenomenal job, fighting tooth and nail for “his” plants and “his” people. Beria, another Georgian, is the hardest to come to grips with, because in the wake of his 1953 disgrace, everyone dumped on him, and he ended up being seen as a totally corrupt sex offender, as well as repressor in chief; it’s something of a shock to see him through the eyes of his son as someone whose beautiful and highly cultured wife was a scientific researcher and who preferred the company of intellectuals. With Kirov, it’s the opposite problem: his early death turned him into a martyr, by definition the nice guy, who everyone remembered as his best friend. The pudgy Malenkov seems the quintessential apparatchik: Who would have thought that after his fall from power he would have immersed himself in biology (his son’s specialty) and cowritten a scientific article on antigravitational pull? Andreev, the former worker, traveled to purging missions in the provinces while listening to Beethoven on his portable gramophone. Kaganovich, the bully with an inferiority complex about intellectuals, was notable for physical bravery; his onetime protégé Khrushchev masked a sharp brain and a decisive personality under a misleadingly “simple peasant” exterior.

The team’s wives and children were part of their lives and mutual interaction, and are thus part of my story. Stalin’s own family ties were attenuated: a wife who killed herself in 1932; an elder son by his first marriage, Yakov, of whom he was dismissive; a wastrel second son, Vasily; and Svetlana, his favorite, who in 1967 was to do the unthinkable for a team offspring and defect to the West. Half of the members of the team were “uncles” to Svetlana. Vasily and Svetlana grew up with the other Kremlin brats, notable among whom were the five rambunctious Mikoyan boys, two of whom got themselves arrested and exiled for some years during the war. Molotov’s wife, Polina Zhemchuzhina, whom he deeply loved, was also arrested for Zionism and sent into exile for eight years while he remained a member of the Politburo: an emancipated strong woman, she founded the Soviet cosmetics industry. Beria and Zhdanov each had one cherished son who, with their parents’ encouragement, became intellectuals, like many of the team’s offspring. The “Kremlin children,” as they grew up, almost all followed their parents’ wishes and stayed out of politics,

most of them receiving a higher education; Svetlana's wartime and early postwar generation fell in love with America, and a number, including Svetlana, majored in American studies at Moscow State University. With the notable exception of Svetlana, the Kremlin children remained close to their parents and, in later decades, tended the flame of their memory.

If you paint a group portrait, especially including the social and domestic context, you almost inevitably humanize your subjects, including Stalin. Some people may find this outcome in principle unacceptable, as tending to detract from recognition of their essential evil. But to yield to this objection means deciding to leave Stalin and his men out of history, ghettoizing them in a special "essence of evil" sector not subject to examination. Arendt wrote in the context of Nazi perpetrators about the banality of evil, which is another way of saying that evil is committed by human beings who are only life-size when you see them up close. As long as we keep them more than life-size and extra-human, we can't see the world from their perspective, and therefore it becomes very difficult to understand why they acted the way they did. Of course, understanding how they saw the world always carries with it the danger of justifying their actions. But for a historian, the opposite danger—that of simply failing to grasp what was happening because of a lack of understanding of what the historical actors thought they were doing—is even greater.

In any case, I can't say that my own experience confirms the notion that doing research on people makes you like them better. You certainly get a feeling of familiarity—with Molotov's blank, impassive expression in response to needling and his stillness, except for the drumming of his fingers; with Beria's combination of smarmy deference to Stalin, boundless energy, and malicious wit; with Ordzhonikidze's explosions and Mikoyan's ability to duck trouble and keep going. As far as Stalin is concerned, the person who has emerged in recent scholarship, starting with the Soviet historian Dmitry Volkogonov during perestroika, is a whole lot cleverer and better-read than we thought before the 1990s. He could be charming as well as cruel. His team feared him, but they also admired and respected him, seeing him (correctly) as in a different league from themselves, particularly in terms of boldness and cunning. From an outsider's point of view, of course, the boldness meant indifference to killing people, and the cunning, which often had a sadistic edge, meant skill at deceiving

them. “You tricky bastard” was one of my commonest private reactions while reading Stalin’s papers.

Some readers may think that nothing but sustained outrage is appropriate for writing about a great evildoer like Stalin. But I think the historian’s job is different from that of prosecutor, or, for that matter, counsel for the defense. Your first task as a historian is to try to make sense of things, and that’s a different brief from prosecution or defense. This is not to deny that there are problems with assuming a stance of objectivity: hard as we might try, we all have biases and preconceived opinions, and it’s a physical impossibility to paint “the view from nowhere.” In my own reading of historical work, I find that I either come to trust the authors (on the basis of their handling of sources and presentation of evidence) or to distrust them, in which case I usually stop reading. I hope my readers come to trust me, but if not, the other option is always available.⁵

This still leaves the question of where my point of observation derives from, since it can’t be from nowhere. For social historians of the Soviet Union, including me in one of my earlier books, *Stalin’s Peasants*, that point is generally with the victims. But that doesn’t work well for political history: the peasants in my book had strong opinions about Stalin but very little reliable information and no opportunity to observe at close quarters. In this book, I have made my point of observation on Stalin (who, like it or not, is the center of this story) from *within his team*. It’s a different perspective from usual, and I think it gives new insights. The team knew more about him than anyone else, having unparalleled access to information and opportunity to observe. In addition, they saw him in the complex way that goes with simultaneously being comrades in arms and potential victims, and in later life, given Stalin’s dethronement in 1956, they had to come to terms with that complexity. I must admit that there is also a personal reason that I like this point of observation. It was always Stalin’s fear that a spy would sneak into his milieu and observe him from up close. In this book, I am that spy.

A word about sources is in order. The Politburo record is relatively thin, partly because of that body’s disinclination to have minutes taken of its deliberations (originally, back in the 1920s, because they couldn’t stop the leaks, not only domestically but internationally). The correspondence with team members is a wonderful source for most of the prewar period,

but the personal side disappears after the war, though fortunately at that time Stalin's absences from Moscow became ever greater, which resulted in a large corpus of letters and telegrams between him and the Politburo collectively. Soviet history is full of myths that became part of Sovietological as well as Moscow folklore. I approach these with a mixture of skepticism and recognition that sometimes the myths turn out to be right. For the 1950s, I use another kind of folklore, the letters about current affairs from Soviet citizens to leaders, as a kind of Greek chorus commenting on the transition and its aftermath.

The profusion of memoirs and late-life interviews was one of the pleasures and challenges of this project. Naturally, they are all, to varying degrees, self-justifying and self-serving, and many of them are written long after the event, or by children (Beria's, Malenkov's, Khrushchev's) who were relating what they remembered their father telling them at the time. You feel, as a historian, that such sources are like lobbyists, all clamoring to make their pitch, yet a book like this couldn't have been written without them. I couldn't help being aware that the people who left the most detailed record (Khrushchev and Mikoyan) are thereby privileged in establishing their version of events. Another inbuilt bias of the sources that needs to be mentioned is that for the purpose of memoirists and Soviet historians, political outcomes turned some people into villains and others into saints. Beria, executed in 1953, is in the first category. The second category includes Kirov, murdered in 1934, along with Kalinin, who in Soviet times was designated as the people's favorite on the team. (I suspect, by the way, that this is wrong and that the people's favorite was the genial and somewhat dashing military man, Voroshilov.)

Stalin's personal archive is rich, but it is also a work of art, carefully pruned and shaped by a variety of hands, starting with his own. Stalin, a master of manipulation who could easily take two sides of an argument in different contexts (which is not to say that he didn't have principles, in his way, as well as purposes), was capable of the most brazen lies but also of unexpected, if no doubt calculated, truth-telling. He had a lively, creative imagination that had once, back in his Georgian youth, made him a poet and in Soviet times led him to take great satisfaction in thinking up scenarios for show trials. He was also, it turns out, an excellent professional-standard editor of other people's texts, including for grammar and punc-

tuation. He is disadvantaged in the memory stakes by leaving no account of his own and being the only team member whose memoirist-child, Svetlana, was not on his side.

Although this book has been researched in archives and primary sources like a scholarly history, it has not been written as one. It seemed a waste to flatten all that high drama and leave out the personal detail, which, for me, made the team come alive. Moreover, the Stalin era is still important to a broader public, especially those who went through the Cold War. In the past I have written extensively about the social, cultural, and everyday aspects of the Soviet experience, but this is my first large-scale foray into high politics or biography. Since it is conceived as a popular book, I have generally not highlighted scholarly controversies. My bibliography includes only such secondary works as are cited, usually as factual sources, in the text. But scholarly readers are also part of my intended audience, which is why I have included detailed notes that enable them to see where I got my information (though to avoid an overabundance of note numbers in the main text, rather than citing each direct quote, I've chosen to group together sources for the quotes, including them under boldface subject lines in the notes section). The conclusion highlights the book's contributions to scholarly debates.

Readers who know my earlier work will recognize some themes from the past, notably, the emphasis on institutional interest in high politics, patronage networks, and everyday interactions. In a way, what I have written is an *Everyday Stalinism* moved from the popular, urban milieu of that earlier book to the strange, isolated world of the Kremlin. But there were unexpected discoveries in the course of my research—things that surprised me, which I hope will also surprise my scholarly colleagues. When I started, I knew the 1930s much better than the postwar and post-Stalin period, and I expected the most interesting and lively period of the team, qua team, would occur then. It seemed plausible that the Great Purges should have snuffed the life out of the team. I spent some time with the Politburo archives for 1939–40 and noted that, while Stalin seemed to be functioning normally, the rest, though functioning and indeed working hard repairing purge damage, were keeping their heads well down. But was this a temporary or permanent change?⁶

Mikoyan made the case in his memoirs that it was the Second World War that was the high point of team effectiveness, the team's finest hour.

That, of course, was incompatible with the hypothesis that the vitality of the team had ended with the Great Purges. Moreover, there was the anomaly in the postwar period of Stalin's failure to remove Molotov and Mikoyan from political power and his social circle, evidently because of resistance from the team. A team that could encroach on Stalin's old, previously unchallenged prerogative of exclusion was surely a team that was still alive and kicking, or at least pushing back. Then, when I started focusing on the post-Stalin chapter, I was struck by how extraordinarily well the team managed the transition, for all their apprehension that without Stalin everything would fall apart. As if it were the most natural thing in the world, the Stalin team without Stalin metamorphosed into a collective leadership—and a reforming one to boot.

Time was when the portraits of team members were carried by marchers on May Day, along with Stalin's, and their names were lavishly bestowed on cities, factories, collective farms, and cultural institutions throughout the country, apparently ensuring their immortality. Then came Stalin's partial dethronement in 1956 and 1961; the ousting of Molotov, Malenkov, and Kaganovich in 1957 and then of Khrushchev, in 1964; and finally the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The city of Molotov reverted to its earlier name of Perm in 1957. During perestroika, team names were removed from a string of North Caucasian and Ukrainian cities, including Lugansk/Luhansk (Voroshilovgrad) and Mariupol (Zhdanov). In Russia, the wartime capital of Kuibyshev resumed the name of Samara in 1991. Only Kalinin and Kirov remained in the atlases, probably by serendipity. Kirov was the luckiest, retaining not only the city and province of Kirov (formerly Vyatka) in the Urals but also the Kirov Ballet, though it is now in Saint Petersburg rather than Leningrad. Kalinin was half lucky, losing Tver in Central Russia but retaining Kaliningrad, the name given to Königsberg when it was acquired by the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War.⁷

Stalin also lost out in the matter of place-names. In 1961, Stalingrad was renamed Volgograd, and the same fate befell Stalino in Ukraine (now Donetsk) and the Tajik capital Stalinabad (now Dushanbe). There is still contestation in Putin's Russia about whether Volgograd should change its name back again, the better to emphasize its heroic past as the site of the battle of Stalingrad in the Second World War. Stalin's name is in no danger of disappearing from Russian consciousness. But the team's names,

except perhaps for Molotov and Voroshilov, will probably be forgotten by the next generation. Nobody is ever going to propose turning Perm back to Molotov, and the recently proclaimed Lugansk People's Republic in Eastern Ukraine, though looking to Russia, has not thought of calling itself Voroshilovgrad again.

The team wouldn't necessarily complain about this neglect. With the exception of Khrushchev (and Beria, if he had had the chance), they were not looking for a separate place in history but were by and large content to be Stalin's comrades in arms in the great work of building socialism—a project that they thought was on the side of history, though that is not the way it looks from the perspective of the twenty-first century. The team used to say, modestly but correctly, that Stalin was the lynchpin of the whole thing, implying what was to them self-evident, namely, that they couldn't have done it without him. But the corollary is also true: he couldn't have done it without them. Let that, for good or ill, be their epitaph.