Everyday ideology: Life during Stalinism

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Postmodernist historians of everyday life in totalitarian societies have underrated the role of ideology at the individual level, preferring a performative reading of subjectivity. Yet this fails to explain why the Soviet and Nazi regimes generated absolute commitment, writes Jochen Hellbeck. What is needed, he argues, is an understanding of how ideology is generated in individual acts of appropriation and self-becoming.

One of the most engrossing and insightful documentary records of daily life in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era originated as the daily scribblings of a peasant youth from Ukraine who had fled from his village in Ukraine to Moscow to escape the deadly wave of the collectivization campaign. The boy’s father, Filip Podlubnyi, had been deported as a “kulak” peasant on charges of exploitation and the pursuit of selfish gains. His sixteen-year-old son Stepan was suspected of having inherited his father’s hostile class essence. Stepan sought refuge in Moscow where no one knew him, partly to hide from the Communist zealots. Yet he embraced his new urban life as an opportunity as well: to become an industrial worker and an educated citizen, and thus to rework his class origins, leaving behind what he believed to be his problematic kulak psychology. In this connection, the diary fulfilled several purposes. On one level Stepan Podlubnyi treated it as a rare friend to whom he could confide the secret of his concealed origins. On another, it served him as a tool of consciousness by means of which he sought to dispose of his problematic past. All the while, Podlubnyi kept his diary with a distinct goal in mind: it was raw material for an autobiographical writing that he intended to publish one day, a novel for which he had already come up with a title: “The life of a redundant class, its spiritual rebirth adjustment to the new conditions”. [1]

As he worked on this project the young author was guided by an awareness of living in an exceptional, historic period that it was his obligation to record. “When will I finally begin to write my memoirs of the thirties?” he wrote in September 1932. [2] The fact that Stepan Podlubny posed this question when the decade had barely begun illustrates how much of a notion he had of the Stalinist industrialization campaign as a distinct epoch in the making. While some portions of the diary read like the chronicle of a fearful observer, the bulk of the journal served the opposite purpose of integrating its author into his new
socio-political environment. In writing, Podlubnyi created a dialogue between his personal life and his age in historical terms; he rose his self to the level of a historical subject. The practice of insistent self-reflection, of “work on the self” (“Arbeit an sich selbst”), and the goal of self-transformation he set for himself were permeated by the revolutionary ideology of his age. Podlubnyi proceeded to remake his self in the very same terms as the Soviet Union as it was being collectivized and industrialized. Both these processes, his individual work on the self, and the revolutionary transformation of the land, were conducted with the same impatience and zeal, betraying the same awareness of a historical time line that had to be accounted for.

This double purpose of the diary as a record of history in the making and of the self as a historical subject in the making, characterized many Soviet diaries from this period. It was true not only of diarists like Stepan Podlubnyi, who sought absolution from their “impure” class-alien origins, but extended to authors who challenged and confronted the communist regime in their personal writings. The more vocally these diarists criticized the political order, the more strongly they appealed to “history” as their arbiter. [3] The awareness these Soviet diarists had of their lives as a historical canvas, onto which a new civilization and a new type of personality awaited to be inscribed, presents a distinct challenge for historians of everyday life. How are we to conceive of ordinary life in an order striving toward the extraordinary and historic? We observe a conflation of daily life and ideological awareness that needs to be captured analytically, so as to account for the intertwined and mutually dependent character of the everyday, self-construction, and revolutionary ideology.

Historians of the everyday respond to this challenge in contradictory ways. There is a growing awareness that ideology matters and that the social history of Stalinism has to reckon with the language and the practices of the state. But this awareness comes short of an open acknowledgment of the power of ideology to shape the terms of social history. This reticence has to do in part with the ways in which ideology has been conceived in the historiography of Stalinism, specifically the “totalitarian/revisionist” debate.

Adherents of the totalitarian paradigm viewed communist ideology as a corpus of official truths that issued from central institutions of power and served the goal of securing state power. Ideology indoctrinated individuals, suggesting to them participation in a great “movement”, while deluding them about their true condition of unfreedom. Though in many ways compelling, this interpretation reduced Soviet citizens to mere victims of the regime’s aspirations. More recently, a generation of social historians has revealed the active participation of large segments of the population in the Bolshevik enterprise. In the process, however, the Soviet order was strangely de-ideologized, and its workings were explained in terms of the “self-interests” of the groups in society identified as its beneficiaries. Yet these historians made no attempt to critically examine the forms self-interest could take in a socialist society. [4]

Recent social historical work still tends to situate people’s lives in the Stalinist system as extraneous to their ideological environment. It also shows a continued reticence to engage with ideology as a productive category of analysis. In a joint essay written for the volume Beyond Totalitarianism (2009), two eminent historians of the everyday, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Alf Lüdtke, discuss the terms of everyday life in Nazi Germany and Soviet Stalinism without once mentioning the term ideology. [5] This is paradoxical, for the thematic focus of the article is on ideology, in substance, if not in name. The authors see
the sphere of the everyday shaped in decisive ways by the respective “great cause” promoted by each regime. It is here that a crucial “energy” is emitted that “drives” people to yearn for inclusion in a larger whole. “In our view it is central for understanding the productive and even more the destructive potential of these regimes to address the emotional charges that drove their respective dynamics ‘from within’: what were the practices of (self-)energizing which people employed or encountered?” [6]

The question is well put, and the author’s final verdict is sound, too. The inclusive and exclusive mechanisms practiced by the two regimes, they conclude, had formidable repercussions for how individuals conceived of themselves in Stalinist Russia and in Nazi Germany. “It is the everyday of those actively included in the Volksgemeinschaft – the ‘participants in socialist construction’, to use the Soviet term – that is illuminated by the energizing paradigm. Those who were excluded and suffered social death found themselves literally ‘switched off.’” [7] Yet this finding stands in tension with the body of the essay, where the authors catalogue a wide range of social formations and emotional bonds, some of them of the state, some outside of it, and some standing in tension with it. It remains unclear just how the mobilizing schemes of the Nazi and the Stalinist regimes were able to cut across other social bonds, remodelling or exploding them.

When Fitzpatrick and Lüdtke discuss individual lives they cast them as distinct from their socio-political environment. The article is intercut with six short biographical sketches, each of them presented in a separate text box. In graphic terms alone, this is an interesting commentary on the autonomy that is granted to these individuals, and on the limits of the “energized” environment to take hold of them. Finally, with their use of the analytical term “energy”, the authors work with an amorphous and multidirectional concept that does not spell out either the direction or the load of the energetic charge, the ways in which the energy penetrated individuals’ bodies or minds, or the effects of this energy on their lives. Ideology, by contrast, would be a more precise designation, not least because it was used by the historical subjects under consideration who relished the clarity and sense of purpose (a directed form of energy!) that accrued from the possession of a distinct worldview. Fitzpatrick’s and Lüdtke’s arresting image of individuals being “literally ‘switched off’” makes sense only if it is joined to such an understanding of ideology with its directed, powerful, often lethal charge.

As a whole, the article gestures toward a rehabilitation of ideology, a move, however, that clashes with the reservations each author has toward ideology as an analytical concept. Fundamentally, both authors appear to project their personal abhorrence of totalizing schemes, of which ideology is but one, onto their historical subject matter, while losing sight of the totalizing longings of the individuals whom they study. [8] Other scholars, writing in a postmodernist key, express a similar distrust of overarching narratives, fearing their hegemonizing thrust, and instead favour moral relativism and a protean, situative, and performative reading of subjectivity. Yet this method makes it difficult to register systems of power that generated absolute intellectual and emotional commitments. What I believe is needed instead is a novel formulation of ideology that departs from the traditional assumption of a monolithic, top-down “Communist Party ideology”, and instead observes the workings of ideology and, indeed, its very generation, in localized, individual acts of appropriation and self-becoming.

In my understanding of ideology in the Soviet context, I do not proceed from any given
theoretical model, of which there are many. All of the more interesting theories of ideology in one way or another stand in the Marxist tradition of defining ideology as the naturalization of a given reality, rendering it impervious to change. This perspective could also be applied to the Soviet case, in the sense that communist ideology – the self-representation of the regime – masked the real power relationships in the Soviet realm. But such a perspective obscures the qualitatively different status of ideology in the communist context. Unlike, say, bourgeois ideology, which aimed to reproduce the current bourgeois order and which therefore operated invisibly, beneath the recesses of the conscious world, communist ideology was deliberate and transformative, and it targeted the conscious mind rather than the political unconscious. It was an open program of action, a blueprint of a world to be realized. Toward the individual, Communist ideology represented itself as total consciousness, and it called on the individual to elevate his subjective mind to this highest level of consciousness. [9]

Investigations of how Communist ideology resonated with the lives of individuals have begun in recent years, but it is still an area in need of further research. [10] The question to be asked is what ideology offered to individuals in substantive terms, independently of its instrumentalist uses. Why was it appealing, and what about it was appealing? Which parts of the ideological text did an individual appropriate, and what were the effects of this productive encounter between ideology and the self? Hannah Arendt observes that ideologies “always contain in themselves the logic of their respective ‘idea.’“ The idea contains in itself a logical process which is spun out by ideology. Arendt seems to suggest that ideology is not a ready-made, fully articulated text; rather, it unpacks itself, like compressed software, in the process of individual appropriation. Yet Arendt is not interested in the individual as an active subject. For her ideology itself is the driving force, and in encountering the individual, ideology eliminates subjectivity: “ideological thinking is […] independent of all [individual] experience” and represents an “emancipation of thought from experienced and experiential reality.” [11] This view underrated individuals’ active and creative participation in the appropriation of ideology, a process that asked them to rework, rather than abandon, subjective experiences. Ideology worked by impelling individuals to read the world through its lens, to structure their sense of self and thereby render it meaningful. This was a creative task that could assume as many different shapes as the number of individual subjects it produced. Individuals poured considerable subjective labour into this process. Raising psychological experience to ideological consciousness was a demanding challenge that kept generating contradictions, moments of failure, and occasions of doubt.

What is thus necessary, as we try to make sense of individuals’ life experience during the Stalin era, is an understanding of ideology that is compatible with subjectivity. This can be accomplished through a shift in the conceptualization of ideology, from a pre-given, fixed textual corpus, in the narrow and reductive sense of “Communist Party ideology”, to a ferment working in the individual and producing a great deal of variation, as it interacted with the subjective life aspects of a given individual. This perspective restores the individual as an agent, but as an ideological agent. Instead of privileging discourse as the sole historical agent, I suggest a circular or dialogical notion of ideology and subjectivity. The individual operates like a clearinghouse where ideology is unpacked, personalized, and in the process the individual remakes himself into a subject with distinct and meaningful biographical features. And in activating the individual, ideology itself comes to life. Ideology should therefore be seen as an adaptive force; it has power
only to the extent that it operates in living individuals who engage their selves and the
world as ideological subjects. Much of the logic of the revolutionary master-narratives of
transformation (transformation of social space and self-transformation), collectivization
(collectivization of individualist producers and collectivization of the self), and
purification (political purge campaigns and acts of personal self-improvement) was
provided and reproduced by Soviet citizens, who kept rationalizing unfathomable state
policies and thus were ideological agents, on a par with the leaders of party and state.

When the American sociologists and historians who took part in the Harvard project on
the Soviet social system interviewed Soviet immigrants to the United States in the early
1950s, they were struck by the degree to which their respondents were used to
conceiving of the world and their lives in it in terms of “dialectical materialism”. Truth for
them had no absolute, essential meaning; instead it was relative and unfolded
developmentally. Apparent contradictions could coexist without either of them being a
lie. The American researchers noted that fifteen percent of their respondents “made
constant use of the Marxian dialectic to explain and to predict”. Sensing an awareness on
the part of the refugee respondents that their chances of entering the US might diminish
if they appeared to be Marxists, the interviewers believed the real number to be much
higher. [12] Dialectical thinking, of course, pervaded Soviet era literature, as well as the
scientific discourse of the Stalinist age. But as the episode from the Harvard Interview
project suggests so graphically, Marxist dialectics was more than just an ideological
precept, understood in the conventional sense as a method informing the production of
Party histories and socialist-realist novels; it was just as much a way of life.

More glaringly even than the Harvard interview protocols, Soviet diaries from the Stalin
era show how their authors conceived of truth in developmental terms and sought to
master it in a process of hard work. Frequently, authors noted tensions or outright
contradictions between the ideological plane (the “ought to”) and the observed reality of
their own daily life (the “is”). The point, however, is that they did not accept these
problems and contradictions, but sought to resolve them by applying mechanisms of
rationalization, often in dialectical form. What this means for researchers interested in
what it meant to live through Soviet times is that they need to redirect their inquiry of
who individuals were, from the identification of select expressions of opinion – whether
overheard by the Secret police or culled from personal diaries by researchers themselves
– to an understanding of subjectivity as a processual quality. This is especially true in the
Soviet revolutionary context, where notions of the ideal personality were predicated on
intense struggle and the striving toward transcendence.

By the same token, researchers need to understand strategies of “rationalization”, which
were very widespread in personal sources from this period, less as desperate attempts to
“rationalize away” uncomfortable truths (as modern psychology would have it) than as a
constitutive mechanism of ideological appropriation. Rationalization – the ability to detect
a rational logic in random acts of state policy, such as sudden arrests of relatives or
friends, or one’s own misfortune – was essential for Soviet citizens who were supposed to
believe in scientific laws of development and the rationality of their existence. Stalin era
contemporaries were constantly asked to rationalize, to make their daily observations fit
ideological mandates. The more their observations parted from the required viewpoint,
the more they were expected to struggle to re-inhabit the grid. An individual’s ability to
rationalize a phenomenon was thus a characteristic of mental strength and spiritual
health. What is more, these mechanisms were not solely internal processes, meant to restore one’s peace of mind. Individuals also applied this agenda of “mastering ideology” to their social lives as workers and citizens, such as when they denounced bosses at work or signed public letters calling for the execution of enemies of the people. [13]

In the course of the 1930s Podlubnyi’s project of self-integration had evolved in paradoxical ways. He succeeded in mastering the lexicon of a dedicated and politically conscious Soviet worker so well that he drew the attention of the secret police (GPU). Believing him to be a trustworthy, aspiring young communist, they asked him to become an informant whose task was to reveal the proverbial “wolves in sheep’s clothing” – class enemies hiding in Soviet society. This involuntary proximity to the GPU, which more than any other state organization incarnated the revolutionary principle of purification, constantly reminded him of his own impure origins. The GPU prompted him to think of himself in precisely the terms he wanted to avoid, namely in an opposition between private thoughts and outward behaviour. This split mind was a far cry from the integrated socialist personality who thought and acted uniformly and as a matter of inner conviction.

While Podlubnyi now frequently felt like a fraud, he erupted in declarations of sincere love and dedication for the Soviet regime whenever he saw signs that he might become a true citizen of the socialist society. But with the sudden arrest of his barely literate mother on charges of anti-Soviet, Trotskyist activities in December 1937, both his chances, as well as his enthusiasm, for integration were undermined. He left the Medical Institute in which he had been enrolled since 1935, and by 1938 his diary had turned into a disillusioned chronicle of the age – the very opposite of the proud record of socialist construction that Podlubnyi had set out to write in 1932.

Podlubnyi now denounced the policies of the Stalinist regime in acerbic terms. The grandiose reception of a returning team of polar explorers was, in his words, an “unprecedented hullabaloo” that served only to deflect popular attention from the trial and execution of the Party’s chief theoretician, Nikolai Bukharin. After reading Quo Vadis? by Henryk Sienkiewicz, which was set in Imperial Rome in the first century A.D., Podlubnyi characterized Stalin as “our Russian Nero,” specifically addressing his personal cult: “It appears that the unjustified lavishing of praise and attribution of good deeds, as well as deification, are possible in our times too, if only in a more subtle form.” [14]

Podlubnyi referred to his diary entries of this period as a “naturalistic recording of facts”. [15] Seen through the lens of socialist realism’s historical confidence, the naturalist perspective was by definition pessimistic and degenerative. Podlubnyi defended his use of naturalism. His purpose, he wrote, was to cast reality in a different light and thus estrange people from the rhetoric they reflexively invoked to describe their lives. Yet to engage with Soviet reality in a naturalist style came at a price. It was not just a question of the danger that these writings posed for Podlubny; they also undermined his self-image, which rested in large measure on socialist realist conceptions of the person. In his diary of the late 1930s, Podlubnyi had to contend with the fact that he had become a “pessimist” at heart, plagued by a lack of willpower, and that his attempt to turn himself into a socialist personality had failed. Having been forced to give up his university studies, he pondered his aimless, “useless” existence: “A life without goals – like an
animal’s [...] what kind of a life is that? There’s nobody to provide me with moral support”. Life “without the feeling of progress” deepened his pessimism. The fact that he did not fight to resume his studies and regain a cheerful perspective was evidence of a diseased will: “Too much has my will been dented. I have lost control over myself.” Finally, there was the issue of his personal life. Now that he was about to turn 25, it was time to get married, yet the few girls who seemed available were all from the less-cultured classes. [16]

From this lowly position he enviously observed the “milieu” of the university students in whose company he had once been. In the spring of 1938 a friend, Vladimir Vorontsov, who had been expelled from the Komsomol two years earlier because his father had been uncovered as a Trotskyist, was readmitted into the youth organization. He had plans to study philosophy and join the Communist Party. Stepan criticized Vladimir for his decision to become a Party apparatchik; Vladimir in turn chided Stepan for his “egoism”, for only taking from life but not giving. To voice purely negative views on existing reality invited charges of egoism, reminding Podlubnyi of his father’s kulak essence against which he had been fighting all along. In some sense, the very outspokenness of Podlubnyi’s political diary kept undermining the ideal of the collectivist, optimistic, and perpetually striving personality against which he continued to measure himself when he contemplated the failure of his life. [17] In a very tangible sense, Podlubnyi found himself “switched off” from the ideological current that he believed animated the organized Soviet collective, to borrow Fitzpatrick’s and Lütke’s ingeneous formulation.

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The concept of the ideological subject presented in this essay does not apply to all empirical Soviet individuals or to the totality of an individual, even if his writings show evidence of such a disposition – witness the ebb and flow of Podlubnyi’s search for integration in the socialist order. What it refers to is a culturally specific frame of selfhood, of what constitutes a desirable life. During the interwar period in the Soviet Union, and perhaps also Europe as a whole from the 1920s to the 1940s, ideology in the sense of personal Weltanschauung and heightened awareness of one’s biography was constitutive of subjectivity. This orientation did not manifest itself at all times; Soviet citizens may not have articulated it when they stood in bread lines and cursed the state distribution system of goods, but it appeared (or, more accurately: was generated) when they recited their autobiographies or justified themselves in public, and also often when they sat down privately to reflect on their lives. [18]

Returning to the history of the everyday and its practice of disconnecting “daily life” from ideology, I see a danger of ignoring the conceptual underpinnings of life, its definition and purpose, in a specific period. Such meaning, I believe, is not universal and not to be culled from universal strategies of daily survival. I find it difficult to subscribe to the proposition, which at first sight may appear basic and unassailable, that Soviet citizens sought to live “ordinary” lives. [19] Many of them strove - or were made to strive – for extraordinary lives, and by the same token Stalinism was an extraordinary period not just because of the excesses caused by the regime, but because of a larger cultural disposition toward the extraordinary. In other words, I believe we must historicize the conceptual underpinnings of the meaning of life, of personal life, and of an epoch. In light of such reconceptualization, we are bound to come to very different conclusions about
the terms of interaction between the Soviet regime and its citizens.

About the historicization of historical time, pending future research it appears that the self-engagement to which the term “ideological subject” refers to was most characteristic of the period of Stalin’s rule. The Stalin era was a particular formation within the larger communist frame; it was defined by party leaders’ deliberate decision to force Soviet society to make a historical leap, toward the end of historical time. [20] This sense, vividly reflected in documents from the Stalin period, of the present as a threshold moment of world history, coupled with an extraordinary willingness to resort to violent means in order to cross the imagined threshold, generated countless individual projects of self-transformation, which were similarly characterized by an unprecedented sense of possibility and necessity. These narratives in some sense depended on an environment of violence to come to fruition. Yet this does not necessarily diminish their experiential relevance. We are familiar from the history of religion that the discovery of truth is often based on prolonged and recurrent suffering.

This conception of the self as an ideological work-in-progress observable during the Stalin period differs profoundly from notions of self familiar to researchers who personally witnessed the last years of the Soviet regime. One reason, perhaps, why the agenda of Stalin era subjectivity gained attention relatively late on was that in thinking about citizens and the state during the Stalin period, we tended to project back in time attitudes that we personally observed during the final years of the Soviet regime, when detached modes of double-speak and cynical engagement of Soviet ideology were rampant. It seems to me, though, that we are mistaken in projecting such conceptions of self, characteristic of the late Soviet regime, back onto an era when the revolution was in full swing, in the form of an ideological apparatus with considerable powers of persuasion, when there existed as of yet no sense of finality – when, in brief, the existential stakes for Soviet citizens were raised to unprecedented heights. It is an altogether different question, in much need of further elucidation, how the heights of Stalin-era self-engagement (d)eveloped over time into the attitudes of critical detachment and alienation that were instrumental for the disintegration of the Soviet system as a whole. [21]

**Footnotes**


2. Ibid. 92.


6. Ibid. 266.

7. Ibid. 301.


12. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "A Short History of Truth and Lies in the Soviet Union from Stalin to Khrushchev", in: Belinda Davis, Thomas Lindenberger, Michael Wildt (eds.), *Alltag,
Erfahrung, Eigensinn. Historisch-anthropologische Erkundungen, Frankfurt and New York 2008, 91-104. Fitzpatrick makes this point to emphasize that Soviet individuals treated truth relativistically and cynically. I read the evidence in opposite ways, as an indication of how much individuals were prone to developmental, systemic thinking, in a Soviet Marxist key.


15. Ibid. 255.

16. Ibid. 254, 264-266, 272f.

17. Ibid. 264, 273.


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