

Introduction

The Communist Party in Leninist Theory, Soviet Practice and Historical Scholarship

The Soviet Union claimed to be a state founded on a class alliance of workers and peasants engaged in the world-historical task of building a communist society.¹ Workers were explicitly recognised as the senior members of this partnership, leading the way in historical progress by means of their political hegemony over the state, exercised through the monopoly in power of the Communist Party. The Party, as the ‘highest form of [the proletariat’s] class organisation’, united in its ranks the most advanced elements of the working class in the struggle for the ‘victory of socialism’.² It was, in Lenin’s expression, the vanguard of the proletariat.³ Ever prone to literary references, Stalin once likened the Communist Party to Antaeus, the giant of Greek mythology who was invincible as long as he remained in contact with his mother, the earth.⁴ By this metaphor, the general secretary suggested that the Soviet Communist Party was not only a leader of the Soviet people, but also born of them and reliant on them for its strength. The premise of this monograph is that such claims reflected strong ideological commitments on the part of the Bolshevik leadership, which ultimately made their way to the institutional architecture of the

¹ The first article of the 1936 Constitution of the USSR stated: ‘The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is a socialist state of workers and peasants.’ A similar idea was expressed by the lengthier introduction to the 1924 Constitution, which declared that the formation of the USSR had divided the world into socialist and capitalist camps. Iu. S. Kukushkin and O. I. Chistiakov, *Ocherk istorii Sovetskoi Konstitutsii* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987), pp. 264, 285.

² Thus stated the preamble to the 1934 Party Rules (*Ustav*) of the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks). All subsequent references to the *Ustav* shall be given in the form *Ustav* (date): (section). (article). These will refer to the text as it appears in the documentary collection *Kommunisticheskaia Partiiia Sovetskogo Soiuza v rezoliutsiakh i resheniakh s’ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK, 1898–1988*, vols. 1–16 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Politicheskoi Literaturi, 1983–90). Hereafter, the terms Party, Communist Party and the acronym VKP (b) will be used interchangeably.

³ V. I. Lenin, ‘Tezisy ko II-mu kongressu kommunisticheskogo internatsionala’, in V. I. Lenin (ed.), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., vol. 41 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1974): 160–212, p. 166.

⁴ *Pravda*, 1 April 1937.

USSR and the way it was governed. The chapters that follow will provide an account of the implications of the institutional reflection of these claims for social and political life in the interwar Soviet Union. It will seek, in short, to answer the question: what did the vanguard party actually do?

This book is the first to place the party grassroots at the centre of its account of the formative first two decades of the Soviet system. Though leading Bolsheviks are the protagonists of most works of political history, this study focuses instead on the activities of the many thousands of ordinary communists who acted as the Party's concrete presence throughout Soviet society. Assembled in a large network of primary party organisations (PPO), the Bolshevik rank-and-file was an army of activists made up of ordinary people. While far-removed from the levers of power, they were nevertheless charged with promoting the Party's programme of revolutionary social transformation in their workplaces, neighbourhoods and households. Their incessant meetings, conferences and campaigns have generated a voluminous source base offering a unique view into the practical manifestation of the Party's vanguard mission. The chapters that follow draw on this rich material to craft a new account of how the Soviet republic functioned in the period from the end of the Russian Civil War in 1921 to its invasion by Nazi Germany in 1941.

One of the most influential social historians of the Soviet Union described party activism as a paradox, pointing out that communist rank-and-filers were representatives of political authority but their activities brought them to conflict with functionaries of the state everywhere.⁵ This dual nature of the grassroots party membership as the promoter of state policy and supervisor of its implementation is the main theme of the following pages, where it will be argued that, instead of a paradox, communist activism is best viewed as a central feature of state–society relations in the Soviet Union. Rank-and-file activism was inseparable from the policy implementation process, with the party leadership and government unleashing successive waves of political campaigns to generate support for their policy initiatives.

There is much in this that is similar to what sociological literature terms political mobilisation.⁶ What differentiates the Leninist concept of the vanguard from agents of political mobilisation more broadly is that the

⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶ An extensive sociological discussion of the concept of mobilisation is Birgitta Nedelmann, 'Individuals and Parties – Changes in Processes of Political Mobilization', *European Sociological Review* 3, no. 3 (1987): 181–202. For examples of the use of the concept in historical research, see

activity of the Party was intended to achieve more than a mere enhancement of the state's instrumental capacity of policy implementation. The vanguard party was conceived of as the means by which the communist content of policy would be safeguarded, ensuring the successful transition of the USSR to communism at some future point. For this, the active involvement of the rank-and-file in the everyday running of industry, agriculture, the military and everything else was as important as the leadership's control of government and the formulation of policy. This was despite the fact that the existence of a purely technical dimension of administration was recognised by Lenin and the acquisition of technical competence by the state apparatus would regularly emerge as a desideratum in policy pronouncements throughout the interwar period.⁷ Getting the state to do what it was told to do was not enough for the Bolsheviks. It had to do things the right way and in the right direction. The very process of policy implementation thus acquired an ideological dimension.

This is crucial for the account offered in this book, because the vanguard principle transformed the party rank-and-file into an ineluctable aspect of the system of government in the USSR. For as long as the leadership remained committed to Marxism–Leninism, it was compelled by its worldview to insist that its policies were implemented by means of activism as well as administration. As will be shown in the chapters that follow, this was so even when it became clear that activism was getting in the way of policy implementation. Significantly, because ideology was more ambiguous than policy, the involvement of the party rank-and-file with the implementation process almost invariably took the form of party activists taking advantage of their status to address their myriad concerns as workers and non-elite members of Soviet society more broadly. This should not be viewed as a cynical attempt to manipulate public discourse. Rank-and-file influence over the implementation process was implied in the vanguard party concept. These people were doing what they were expected to do, even if particular outcomes left much to be desired from the perspective of the leadership.

The paradox in this, if any, is that the party grassroots moved politically closer to the leadership the more they disorganised policy implementation

Stefano Bartolini, *The Political Mobilization of the European Left, 1860–1980: The Class Cleavage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Gregory M. Luebbert, *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Interwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Susan Whitney, *Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁷ V. I. Lenin, 'Luchshe men'she, da luchshe', *PSS*, vol. 45: 389–406.

by getting involved in it. Reliant as it was on the input of non-professional activists, this mode of governance gave the latter significant opportunities to pursue their own interests, thus also giving them a stake in the system. Before expanding further on the content of this monograph, it is necessary to clarify its motivation; why study the communist rank-and-file?

The central argument of this book is that the Soviet Union remained a revolutionary polity committed to deep social transformation throughout the interwar period. The vanguard party was the main agent of this revolutionary process, not only as the producer of policy that sought social change, but also as the main instrument by which elements of Soviet society were themselves involved in bringing about this change. The PPO was the organisational space where the policies conceived by the Party leadership who held state power were put into practice by those workers, technicians and administrators who held party cards. It thus acted as an institutional interface between the Soviet state and the society it governed. The account that follows is predicated on an understanding of revolution as a rapid transformation of the relationship between society and the state.⁸ It shows that the turbulent fluidity of this relationship received institutional form in the way the vanguard party functioned at its grassroots. In that regard, this book contributes to a broader historiographical trend exploring how the class tensions, political strategies and cultural outlooks that animated revolutions were subsequently transcribed onto the practices and institutions they produced.⁹

The nature of Soviet state–society relations has also been the central question of historical scholarship on the USSR. Telling the story of the early years of Soviet power from the perspective of the party rank-and-file makes it possible to rethink this relationship by sidestepping the problem of primacy that fuelled much of the heated debate that dominated the field

⁸ This classic definition is in Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 4.

⁹ David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840* (New York: Palgrave, 2009); Gail Bossenga, 'The Nobility's Demise: Institutions, Status, and the Role of the State', *The American Historical Review* 124, no. 3 (2019): 942–49; Stephan Fender, *The Global Perspective of Urban Labor in Mexico City, 1910–1929: El Mundo al Revés* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Robert Gerwarth, *November 1918: The German Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Sebastian Heilmann et al., *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Ralf Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Julia C. Strauss, *State Formation in China and Taiwan: Bureaucracy, Campaign, and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

in its pre-archival period and has remained implicit in much of its intellectual output to the present day. Virtually every student of Soviet history learns about the acrimonious controversy between scholars subscribing to the totalitarian model of the Soviet state and the younger generation of revisionist historians that sought to deconstruct it. Totalitarianists argued that the power of the state over society was for analytical purposes boundless and consequently framed their scholarship around the intentions of state actors. By contrast, revisionists sought to demonstrate that social realities constrained the power of the state and even forced policy changes, even if, ultimately, all initiative came from above. The debate was to a large extent one about primacy. The problem with this was pointed out by J. Arch Getty at the height of the controversy. Being the product of a revolution, the Soviet Union had no obvious boundaries between state and society. 'An internally divided, improvised, inexperienced, and constantly renovating officialdom shaded almost imperceptibly into a dynamic, mobile, dramatically changing society.'¹⁰

As the disintegration of the USSR and the decline of the world communist movement appeared to make Cold War categories redundant, the heat generated by these debates died down. A more synthetic picture emerged, where Party leaders for whom Marxist–Leninist ideas matter can and do employ ruthless state power but are constrained by several factors leaving their own mark on historical development. Combined with the vastly increased availability of archival sources after 1991, the fading of old demarcations has led to a reorientation of scholarly efforts to highly empirical research eschewing attempts at broader interpretative syntheses. Some two decades after the archival revolution, one reviewer of the state of the field suggested that the collapse of old intellectual certainties could produce better history, even though it made for duller headlines.¹¹ Though there is much to agree with in this assessment, this book begins from the premise that the old bottom-up versus top-down binary remains implicit in much of the contemporary literature.¹²

¹⁰ J. Arch Getty, 'State, Society, and Superstition', *The Russian Review* 46, no. 4 (1987): 391–96, p. 394.

¹¹ Catriona Kelly, 'What Was Soviet Studies and What Came Next?', *The Journal of Modern History* 85, no. 1 (2013): 109–49, p. 149.

¹² A recent book-length historiographical examination of debates on Stalinism is for the most part structured around the totalitarian–revisionist divide and suggests that pre-archival arguments have remained remarkably resilient in the present era. Mark Edele, *Debates on Stalinism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 4–6. Quaint accusations of Stalinist apologia also still appear in book reviews: Oleg Khlevniuk, 'Top Down vs. Bottom-up: Regarding the Potential of

This becomes apparent if we consider more recent attempts at developing interpretative frameworks for the Soviet interwar period. One fertile departure in the literature has sought to frame the Soviet project of socialist construction within the broader framework of modernisation, tracing the origins of Marxism–Leninism in the intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment as an attempt to use reason and technological progress in order to improve human life, both materially and culturally.¹³ The specificity of the Soviet Union lay in the particular historical legacy of the Russian Empire, combined with the explicitly non-capitalist path of development prescribed by Marxism–Leninism. A quest to overcome the backwardness of old Russia by revolutionary means and at any cost was the essential element of what a prominent contributor to the modernisation literature termed ‘Stalinism as a civilization’.¹⁴ By contrast, other scholars took issue with the concept of modernity as a descriptor of Soviet realities, arguing that whatever the intellectual lineage of Marxism–Leninism, the Party’s transformative project was thwarted by the weight of Russian history. On their views, the persistence or re-emergence of informal power networks, authoritarian rule and ethnic particularism, among other things, betrayed the nature of the USSR as a neo-traditional or neo-patrimonial state.¹⁵

Contemporary “Revisionism”. trans. Aaron Hale-Dorrell and Angelina Lucento, *Cahiers du monde russe. Russie – Empire russe – Union soviétique et États indépendants* 56, no. 56/4 (2015): 837–57; Hiroaki Kuromiya, ‘Stalin’s World: Dictating the Soviet Order’, *Revolutionary Russia* 28, no. 2 (2015): 199–201; E. A. Rees, ‘On Stalin’s Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics’, *Revolutionary Russia* 29, no. 1 (2016): 110–12.

- ¹³ Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015); David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Peter Holquist, ‘“Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work”: Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context’, *The Journal of Modern History* 69, no. 3 (1997): 415–50; Amir Weiner, ed., *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- ¹⁴ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism As a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- ¹⁵ J. Arch Getty, *Practicing Stalinism: Bolsheviks, Boyars, and the Persistence of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Yoram Gorlizki, ‘Ordinary Stalinism: The Council of Ministers and the Soviet Neopatrimonial State, 1946–1953’, *The Journal of Modern History* 74, no. 4 (2002): 699–736; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Yuri Slezkine, ‘The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism’, *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–52.

There has occurred a certain inversion of analytical focus, whereby scholars interested in the ideological motivations of state policy look for its effects on the granular everyday practices of social life, while those interested in the deeper structures of Russian society examine their manifestations in the political behaviour of the Soviet leadership. This tends to reproduce the analytical distinction between state and society and, implicitly, the search for first causes in their relationship. We seem to be left with much the same picture as before the archival revolution, whereby the state tried to shape society according to its revolutionary vision and society responded in ways that yielded unexpected outcomes, modern or neo-traditional. We are still missing a way to put the insight gained by access to the archives into a clearer account of socio-political dynamics than was the case before.

It is not the purpose of this monograph to propose anything as ambitious as a new theory of state–society relations in Soviet history. Instead, it will show that studying a particular feature of the institutional structure of the USSR points the way to a better understanding of the concrete functioning of this relationship in the interwar period. That feature is the rank-and-file of the Communist Party, the mass membership whose party status did not translate into executive positions in the state apparatus. The dual status of party rank-and-filers as *ipso facto* supporters and functionaries of the Soviet system on the one hand and as regular citizens on the other renders the state–society distinction null in their case. The party grassroots were both functionally and by design the locus in the Soviet system (*stroï*) where state and society overlapped. This is because the primacy question emerged as problem of policy for the Bolsheviks well before it became a problem of research for historians. The Leninist concept of the vanguard party was an attempt to provide a solution to the problem of how the state apparatus would remain under the control of a specific part of society – the proletariat – while at the same time pursuing a consistent political project, the historical transition to communism. The chapters that follow will show that the ideological underpinnings of the Soviet system had a concrete institutional reflection in the Communist Party, with profound effects on the way the Soviet state was governed.

This book then speaks to a number of more specialised scholarly debates. First, it contributes to a long tradition of works examining the capacity of the state to implement its policy at different levels of the apparatus. Getty's major contribution to the original revisionist challenge was to show that the Party and state apparatuses had been in such a chaotic state during the interwar period as to make the complex political intrigues

posited by totalitarian scholars implausible.¹⁶ Post-archival research added further layers of complexity to the question of administrative weakness, with James Harris demonstrating that regional power holders such as industrial managers and local party bosses had the ability to mislead the centre and avoid implementing directives they found impossible or simply inconvenient.¹⁷ This centre–periphery power contest had important implications for the question of the origins of the mass repression campaigns of the mid–late 1930s. Political violence was a tool used to bring powerful barons to heel, but was also driven by the information provided by the very same local leaders. Threat inflation was a key tactic used by regional leaders to secure extra power and avoid accountability for policy failures.¹⁸

By focusing on the party rank-and-file, this study enhances our understanding of how the Soviet system functioned, highlighting a level of politics that has received scarce attention. As the following pages will show, PPO activities blurred the lines between the managers and the managed, by delegating aspects of policy implementation to the latter. This meant that the problem of administrative weakness, actual and perceived, was exacerbated the stronger the Party's presence became on the ground. For the leadership, this was both a source of frustration and a resource in its tussles with regional power centres.

The party rank-and-file emerges here as an additional factor that further complicates known power dynamics. With regard to mass repression, the PPO provided a distinct channel through which existing social tensions could become entangled with state security concerns and thus contribute to the proliferation of violence. This book thus contributes to the literature on the social dynamics of Soviet political violence, but its focus remains broader.¹⁹ Through their membership in the PPO, grassroots communists

¹⁶ John Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹⁷ James R. Harris, *The Great Urals: Regionalism and the Evolution of the Soviet System* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ J. Arch Getty, “Excesses Are Not Permitted”: Mass Terror and Stalinist Governance in the Late 1930s’, *The Russian Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): 113–38; J. Arch Getty, ‘The Rise and Fall of a Party First Secretary: Vainov of Iaroslavl’, in James Harris (ed.) *The Anatomy of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); James Harris, *The Great Fear: Stalin’s Terror of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Archival studies of the social dynamics of repression include Wendy Z. Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin’s Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Cynthia Hooper, ‘Terror from within: Participation and Coercion in Soviet Power, 1924–1964’. Unpublished dissertation, Princeton University, 2003; James Hughes, *Stalinism in a Russian Province: A Study of Collectivization and Dekulakization in Siberia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

became involved in all of the cataclysmic transformations that defined the Soviet interwar period but also every little intermediary policy adjustment. Neither dissidents nor state executives, but both militantly communist and fiercely protective of their workplace interests, these people were the concrete manifestation of the twin ideals of activist governance and participatory citizenship that lay at the heart of Marxist–Leninist ideology.

Questions of citizenship and grassroots politics form a significant part of the research agenda on the evolution of the Soviet system after the Second World War. Soviet elections, party conferences and anticorruption campaigns are often framed as attempts to reinforce the system's legitimacy with the demanding public of citizen-soldiers, or as mechanisms of containing tensions within a much expanded and more assertive administrative apparatus.²⁰ This study shows that post-war political practices had a long pedigree in the institutional experimentation of the 1920s and 1930s, thus placing them in the long(er) *durée* of the Soviet state-building project.

Finally, this monograph speaks to the perennial question of the role of ideology in Soviet governance. Marxism–Leninism features prominently in the chapters that follow, both as a causal factor and, more importantly, as the boundary of possibility and desirability with respect to policy for all actors involved. What is more, the main object of this study, the party organisation, was itself a product of Marxist–Leninist ideology rather than a deep structure of Russian history. The account that follows contributes to a tradition of scholarship examining the tension in Soviet governance between the demands of technical competence and ideological purity. In a detailed account, David Priestland traced the origins of this tension to an uneasy balance between scientific and romantic elements that was already present in Marx's thought.²¹ Other scholars have approached this problem with reference to competing factions of 'reds' and 'experts' or puritans and pragmatists in the leadership, with policy content reflecting the balance of power between them.²²

²⁰ Edward Cohn, *The High Title of a Communist: Postwar Party Discipline and the Values of the Soviet Regime* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015); Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Substate Dictatorship: Networks, Loyalty, and Institutional Change in the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); Serhy Yekelchuk, *Stalin's Citizens: Everyday Politics in the Wake of Total War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also Alexei B. Kojevnikov, *Stalin's Great Science: The Times and Adventures of Soviet Physicists* (London: Imperial College Press, 2004), chapter 8.

²¹ David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 21–34.

²² Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Ordzhonikidze's Takeover of Vesenkha: A Case Study in Soviet Bureaucratic Politics', *Soviet Studies* 37, no. 2 (1985): 153–72; J. Arch Getty, 'Pragmatists and Puritans: The Rise and Fall of the Party Control Commission', *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European*

This study shows that the PPO was an inherently ‘red’ institution. By its very function, it tended to amplify the radical aspects of party policy and make any technocratic retrenchment hard to implement in practice. At its most direct point of contact with society, the Soviet system was always ideologically charged, in a manner reflecting the views and preferences of grassroots party activists. This argument also has implications for our understanding of how Soviet citizens internalised and interpreted official ideology. A significant body of work has approached this as a process of linguistic adaptation – ‘speaking Bolshevik’ – reflecting various levels of psychological transformation.²³ In the pages that follow, the PPO emerges as the political space where Soviet citizens could both learn and effectively deploy Bolshevik rhetoric. The ability to act Bolshevik was both an incentive and a prerequisite for mastering this vernacular.

Communist rank-and-filers were as much Marxist–Leninist advocates and executors of government policy as they were workers and functionaries concerned with their immediate environment. Their activity was a fundamental element of the Soviet political system, one that renders the contours of the imperceptible shading of the state into society much more discernible to the historian. For the state, the party rank-and-file was a section of society that could be relied upon to promote its policies. For the large majority of people who had little influence over state power, it was a part of the Soviet system that could make sure these policies were implemented in a way consistent with their needs. This monograph will examine how communist activists mediated state–society relations in the Soviet interwar period. The remainder of this introduction will outline how.

1.1 Methodological Leninism: Studying the Communist Rank-and-File

Due in large part to the persistence of the state–society binary, the Communist Party as a distinct political institution with specific traits

Studies, no. 1208 (1997); Jonathan Harris, *The Split in Stalin’s Secretariat, 1939–1948* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008); Daniel Stotland, *Purity and Compromise in the Soviet Party-State: The Struggle for the Soul of the Party, 1941–1952* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

²³ Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies: Initiating the Bolshevik Self* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); Igal Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions: Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, ‘Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin’s “Magnetic Mountain” and the State of Soviet Historical Studies’, *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44, no. 3 (1996): 456–63; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 198.

deriving from its vanguard mission has received very little attention in post-1991 scholarship. Because the USSR was a single party state, research on the Soviet political process has tended to treat the Party as a layer of the state apparatus, with one researcher having explicitly argued that it was not a political organisation in any meaningful sense of the term.²⁴ However, although administrative tasks did make up a significant share of the Party's workload, there are strong reasons to reject the view of the Party as an all-Union staffing agency. Not only has research on ideology demonstrated its close connection to policy formulation, but the only recent budgetary study of VKP (b) has shown that 'the Party's most significant expenditure item was for ideology'.²⁵ The same study also showed that the Party was financially independent of the state, relying increasingly on membership dues and publishing revenues, and concluded that it was an autonomous actor within the Soviet system.²⁶ If the Party can be shown to have been both institutionally distinct from the state and primarily concerned about ideology-related activities, it follows that a study of the Party must take into account the tasks it set for itself on the basis of its ideological principles. For the purposes of this investigation, it is therefore necessary to set out the implications of the vanguard concept for the way the Party functioned.

Some cultural histories of the Soviet interwar period have described the vanguard status of the Party as being predicated on a claim of possession of esoteric knowledge in the form of Marxism–Leninism.²⁷ This is incorrect because, although the precepts of Marxism–Leninism did acquire a dogma-like status of unquestionability, there was nothing esoteric about them. Whatever its epistemic value, Marxism–Leninism had the cultural status of a scientific discipline and was, therefore, in principle accessible to

²⁴ I. V. Pavlova, *Stalinizm: stanovlenie mekhanizma vlasti* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskii Khronograf, 1993), introduction. McAdams's recent transnational account of the Communist Party as a political institution makes a similar point, suggesting that VKP (b) essentially ceased to be a political institution after Stalin's elimination of all opposition. A. McAdams, *Vanguard of the Revolution: The Global Idea of the Communist Party* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). This understanding of the Party as an essentially administrative organ was strongly related to the view that Stalin's ultimate victory in the power struggles of the NEP-era was founded on his control of staffing appointments. For a recent refutation of this view, see Harris, *Great Fear*, pp. 58–75. Harris argues that Stalin's tactical advantage did not lay in control of appointment, but in gaining the loyalty of regional party secretaries by providing them with security of tenure (p. 59). This argument is convincing, but it still turns on the administrative functions of the party apparatus.

²⁵ Eugenia Belova and Valery Lazarev, *Funding Loyalty: The Economics of the Communist Party* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 17–18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, p. 16. Kotkin goes further, describing Communist Party rule as akin to a theocracy. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, pp. 293–95.

any interested and literate person. Members of the non-party public were encouraged to acquaint themselves with Marxism–Leninism, as with science in general, as part of their general education through books, periodicals and activities organised by party members. Acquiring and disseminating knowledge of Marxism–Leninism as the science of revolution was a core aspect of a communist’s vanguard mission, but possessing this knowledge was not what vanguard status consisted in.

Being part of the vanguard was instead a matter of commitment. The distinctive feature of Bolshevism lay in the fact that it ascribed crucial ideological importance to certain organisational principles, central amongst which were discipline, centralism and active participation of members in all activities.²⁸ These were initially conceived as means to defend the Party from repression by the tsarist state while also training and socialising increasing numbers of working-class militants in the ways of revolutionary activity. When after revolution and civil war the Bolsheviks successfully established their authority over what would become the USSR, the Party’s main task became the implementation of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This consisted of the twin tasks of preventing capitalist restoration by any means necessary and involving the greatest part possible of the country’s working population in the implementation of the Party’s programme of socialist transformation and cultural enlightenment.²⁹ Institutionally, this translated on the one hand into the familiar mirroring of the state by the party apparatus in a supervisory capacity. On the other, it meant that the broad ranks of the membership were expected to actively promote party policy and become involved in the day-to-day running of their workplace, in order to ensure that things were being done in the spirit of policy and ideology.

To better ground the discussion that follows in this book, it is worth devoting some space to examining the Bolsheviks’ ideas about the place of their party in a post-revolutionary society in more detail. The nature of the transformation of the Bolshevik party from an instrument of

²⁸ This is a theme running through all the early works of Lenin on the Party, but expressed most clearly in *What Is to Be Done?* V. I. Lenin, ‘Chto Delat?’, *PSS*, vol. 6: 1–192, especially pp. 111–54. The question of active participation was among the core elements of the organisational differences that led to the schism between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks at the Second Congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party in 1903. In his speech, Lenin argued that it would be extremely dangerous to extend party membership rights to people who were not members of a party organisation. ‘Every member of the Party is responsible for the Party and the whole of the Party is responsible for every member . . . It is our duty to protect the solidity, consistency and purity of our Party’. V. Lenin, ‘II S’ezd RSDRP’, *PSS*, vol. 7: 260–312, p. 290.

²⁹ Lenin, ‘Tezisy’, pp. 185–86.

revolution to one of government was to a large extent determined by their understanding of the nature of state power in the transition from capitalism to communism. Before the October revolution, Lenin had followed Marx and Engels in regarding the state as an evil of class society that would gradually become unnecessary as more and more people became involved in public administration to run the common affairs of society. His pamphlet on the *State and Revolution* was Lenin's most extensive statement on the subject, proposing a system of direct, mass participation in state affairs that would largely render organised hierarchies of enforcement superfluous. To be sure, some sort of coercion would have to exist, but its character would be more akin to the intervention of concerned citizens to prevent a crime, rather than an organised apparatus of repression. The state would, thus, 'wither away'.³⁰

Within that context, the role of the party was to provide the core of conscious workers who, leading by example, would draw the broader toiling masses into the task of governance. Although this is not explicitly stated in *State and Revolution*, Lenin made the point in a subsequent article responding to critics of Bolshevism who denounced their radicalism as the demagoguery of political dilettantes who had no intention to actually govern. Published weeks before the October uprising, *Will the Bolsheviks hold State Power?* contained a striking passage that is worth quoting at some length.

We are not utopians. We know that every unskilled labourer, every kitchen-maid cannot right now join in state governance. In this we agree [with other parties]. But we differ . . . in that we demand an immediate break with the prejudice that only the rich and bureaucrats from rich families can run the state. . . . *Conscious workers must lead*, but they are able to draw into the task of governance the masses of toilers and the oppressed.³¹

Lenin proceeded to note that the Russian proletariat had created a quarter-million strong party to 'to take control and set in motion the state apparatus in a planned manner', thus being able to demonstrate in practice that the working class was up to the task of providing its own 'food, milk, clothing, accommodation'.³² He, thus, introduced into Bolshevik political thought two ideas that went on to play a significant role in laying the

³⁰ Lenin, 'Gosudarstvo i Revoliutsiia', in *PSS*, vol. 33, pp. 102. Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* in hiding following the Provisional Government's crackdown on workers' organisations after the failed rising known as the July Days. This suggests that the Bolshevik leader viewed the development of a theoretical framework to guide a post-revolutionary polity as a matter of great urgency.

³¹ Lenin, 'Uderzhat li bol'sheviki gosudarstvennuiu vlast?', in *PSS*, vol. 34, pp. 315–16.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 329–33.

intellectual framework for Soviet mass politics. First, he defined political participation in terms of engaging with the process of production and provision for people's everyday needs, thus advocating a type of social citizenship.³³ Second, Lenin concretised the sketch of socialist state–society relations provided in *State and Revolution* while at the same time qualifying it. The mass involvement of the toiling masses in public administration that was to lead to the withering away of the state would have to be pioneered by the most daring and advanced of workers, that is the party. These two concepts are crucial for the argument made in this book.

Within months of October, with the Russian economy collapsing under the strain of the developing Civil War, Lenin was forced to signal a retreat from the principles of the commune-state proclaimed in *State and Revolution*. Shortly after the signing of the controversial Brest–Litovsk treaty with Imperial Germany, which saw revolutionary Russia lose roughly a quarter of its European territory and a similar part of its economic capacity, Lenin issued a forceful call for retrenchment.³⁴ In *The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Power* he reiterated the two principles of socialist governance sketched out in his September article, but also dispensed with any wishful thinking over the prospect of a decline in state coercion. Lenin argued that, faced with a catastrophic crisis, the first priority of the revolutionary state was the ‘organisational task’ of preventing socio-economic disintegration by providing elementary public security and economic growth. Leaving little room for doubt on whether this would involve the use of repressive means, Lenin declared that the ‘construction of socialism requires orderly organisation’ which in turn required

³³ The concept of social citizenship was developed by the British sociologist T. H. Marshall. Marshall argued that welfare rights established in the twentieth century were part of an evolutionary process of citizenship and, thus, a necessary element of the latter in modern societies. T. H. Marshall and Tom Bottomore, *Citizenship and Social Class* (London: Pluto Press, 1992). Lenin's position was of course more radical, in that he argued in favour of the active engagement of worker-citizens in the executive process of welfare provision. Interestingly, the contemporary idea of the Communist Party of China regarding economic welfare as a fundamental human right draws on Lenin but is also rooted in the Three Principles of the People enunciated by the father of Chinese nationalism Dr Sun Yat-Sen. See on this, Liu Hainian, ‘The Struggle for Human Rights by the Communist Party of China (1921–1949)’, Institute of Law of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences website, available at: www.iolaw.org.cn/global/en/new.aspx?id=44851, last accessed 9 February 2019. The significant point here is that the notion of economic and social welfare as a fundamental right was not peculiar to Bolshevism in twentieth century political thought. Lenin's view was extraordinary in that it advocated that those concerned (workers) should seize control of the very process of welfare provision (production and distribution).

³⁴ Borislav Chernev, *Twilight of Empire: The Brest–Litovsk Conference and the Remaking of East-Central Europe, 1917–1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

‘coercion in the form of dictatorship’.³⁵ Crucially, Lenin defined dictatorship as ‘iron authority’ which acted ruthlessly ‘against exploiters as well as hooligans’ and concluded that it was the party’s responsibility to lead the masses down the ‘path of labour discipline’.³⁶

The *Tasks* represented a significant departure from *State and Revolution* in that they represented an acceptance on Lenin’s part of a legitimate coercive role for the state beyond defence against counter-revolutionaries (exploiters) to include the provision of public order (against hooligans) and the maintenance of economic activity (labour discipline). Combined with the principles of mass participation and communist leadership, Lenin’s notion of revolutionary proletarian dictatorship proved to be a winning strategy for the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War.³⁷ In the years that followed, Lenin’s party proceeded to reconquer most of the former Tsarist empire by destroying their opponents on the battlefield while using a combination of tactics to co-opt or suppress anti-Bolshevik supporters of the Soviet cause.³⁸ A crucial turning point came in July 1918 when, following a failed coup by their former partners, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks were left in sole charge of the Soviet state apparatus, effectively establishing one-party rule. By the time the Red Army had emerged victorious in the Civil War, some of the Party’s prominent members were beginning to wonder about the increasingly authoritarian direction the nascent Soviet state was taking, as well as about the effects this was having on the Party itself and its relationship with the country’s working class. These concerns generated the first major oppositionist challenge to the general line launched during the Party’s Tenth Congress in 1921. The account offered in this book picks up the thread from there.

Its argument will be illustrated by means of a study of party activism in Leningrad in the period 1921–41. The year of the German invasion of the

³⁵ Lenin, ‘Ocherednye zadachi Sovetskoi vlasti’, in *PSS*, vol. 36, pp. 194. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 196, 203.

³⁷ For an interesting regional study of how the Bolsheviks generated support among neutral populations by organising participatory structures, see Aaron B. Retish, *Russia’s Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³⁸ The literature on the Russian Civil War is vast, but see indicatively Jonathan Smele, *The ‘Russian’ Civil Wars, 1916–1926: Ten Years That Shook the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For examples of Bolshevik coalitions with other groups, see Lara Douds, *Inside Lenin’s Government: Ideology, Power and Practice in the Early Soviet State* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), chapter 2; Alex Marshall, ‘The Terek People’s Republic, 1918: Coalition Government in the Russian Revolution’, *Revolutionary Russia* 22, no. 2 (2009): 203–21; Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917–1922* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 142–73.

USSR has been selected as the end point of the account offered here, on the assumption that the commencement of the Great Patriotic War transformed the relationship between Party, state and society to a significant extent and that, as a consequence, the study of party activism in war conditions would constitute a different subject of inquiry. Leningrad has been selected as the geographical focus for this study because of its interesting political history, its solid industrial economic base and the quality of its party records. The purpose of this book is not to suggest that Leningrad party life was representative of that of the rest of the country. Instead, the focus on Leningrad is intended to frame this study within the conditions best suited to an examination of the practical implications of the Leninist concept of the vanguard party. These include high party density in a highly urbanised environment and, also, a series of important political convulsions such as the fall of Zinoviev, the assassination of Sergei Kirov and the front-line status of the city in the run up to the Second World War, all of which required and elicited different responses from the 'most advanced elements' of Leningrad's working class.

A combination of sources is deployed to support the argument offered in the following chapters. Published materials, the press and secondary literature are used to demonstrate the political objectives of Party leaders, the conditions in which these were pursued, as well as the role assigned to the rank-and-file in the leadership's vision. The archival records of the Leningrad Region party committee and its bureau are used to demonstrate how all-Union policy was regionally concretised and to shed light on the ways in which the regional leadership sought to mobilise the grassroots. The concrete response of rank-and-file communists to the policy initiatives of the centre is examined by means of a micro-historical case study on the Primary Party Organisation (PPO) of Leningrad's Red Putilovite (*Krasnyi Putilovets*, KP) machine building plant, later renamed Kirov factory.

This is based on the stenographic records of the organisation's general assemblies – later conferences – and the protocols (minutes) of various other activities organised by the factory's communists. The value of this source material lies in that it affords us a unique close-up view into the workings of the party organisation. Stenographic records of conferences preserve a large volume of rich and often entertaining detail, including heckling from the floor and the occasional joke, providing rare texture to the world of factory political activism. The often-handwritten protocols of lower-level gatherings similarly offer rare insight into the way that even the

most mundane aspects of the production process could become entangled with ideological affairs in the highly politicised world of Soviet industry.

Equally important is the information that can be gleaned from the more formalised features of these records, like the notes on attendance, participation and of course the meetings' agendas. Thus, the fact that conference attendance rarely fell below the 1,000 mark gives us an indication of both the sheer scale of these events and the size of the audience reached by the discussions held therein. Similarly, that even small groups of communists in the shop cells could and did hold structured meetings on often seemingly obscure party affairs is testament to the influence of Bolshevik political culture down to the very bottom of the apparatus. Furthermore, protocol and stenographic records often include a large volume of question notes (*zapiski*) that reached speakers from the floor. Usually anonymous, *zapiski* contained in their majority topical questions, but could often be simple statements of opinion or (perceived) fact. Their value as sources lies in that their anonymity gave their authors the opportunity to express views that were beyond the boundaries of political acceptability.³⁹ Deploying them alongside the transcripts of speeches made at party gatherings makes it possible to compare what it was possible to say in the context of a party meeting to what was of actual concern to the rank-and-filers.

The KP/Kirov case study takes its methodological cue from Lenin's insistence on the centrality of the organisational form of the Party for its vanguard mission. As the primary party organisation was the 'foundation of the Party', a study of party activism is best conducted by means of a detailed investigation of such an organisation.⁴⁰ A micro-historical study of a specific organisation provides the opportunity to examine the activity of the party rank-and-file in a sustained manner through time, in order to appreciate both the continuities and disruptions in the reception of policy initiatives by the mass membership. Again, the selection criterion has not been typicality. The giant KP/Kirov plant was far from typical, having an illustrious revolutionary history and being at the cutting edge of Soviet industrial technology, pioneering the country's tractor and later tank

³⁹ For a more detailed discussion of *zapiski* as sources, see Gleb J. Albert, "'Comrade Speaker!' Zapiski as Means of Political Communication and Source for Popular Moods in the 1920s", *The NEP Era: Soviet Russia 1921–1928*, 8 (2015): 43–54.

⁴⁰ *Ustav 1936*, VIII: 48. The *Ustav* of 1926 referred to the same level of organisation as 'cell' (*iacheika*). *Ustav 1926*, X: 57. For the sake of clarity, I have used the term 'primary party organisation' and abbreviation PPO throughout this book. Because of its size, the KP/Kirov PPO included sublevels of organisation known as 'shop-cells' (*tskhbiatseiki*), operating in the enterprise's various workshops and departments. Whenever the term 'cells' appears, it refers to the factory's shops.

production processes. The factory's engineers visited and hosted their American counterparts, while famous foreign communists like Ernst Thälmann and Clara Zetkin addressed the enterprise's workers on several occasions, as did esteemed Soviet dignitaries like Maksim Gorkii.⁴¹ Its immense organisation was one of seventeen out of 1,814 in the city of Leningrad to be made up of over 1,000 members.⁴² Party saturation at KP/Kirov was also particularly high, floating around the 14 per cent mark throughout most of the period studied while the city average never exceeded a brief highpoint of 8 per cent in 1933 and was usually just over 5 per cent.⁴³

The KP/Kirov Primary Party Organisation was, thus, a special party group in an exceptional enterprise. The purpose of the case study is therefore not to produce a readily generalizable picture of Soviet interwar party activism but, rather, to provide a detailed account of this aspect of the Soviet political system in what were near ideal conditions for its operation. If the party were to lead the working class to the 'victory of socialism', there were few places better to do that than a factory where more than one in ten workers were communists. By contrast, conditions in the countryside were far less hospitable to the Bolshevik political project.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, maintaining awareness of the favourable environment in

⁴¹ For a discussion of the fame and special status of KP, see the introduction in Clayton Black, 'Manufacturing Communists: "Krasnyi Putilovets" and the Politics of Soviet Industrialization, 1923–1932'. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1996.

⁴² *Leningradskaiia Organizatsiia KPSS v. Tsifrah, 1917–1973* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1974), p. 135. Roughly two thirds, or 1,254 organisations had between 3 and 49 members. There were also 258 PPOs numbering between 50 and 100 members and 285 between 101 and 1,000.

⁴³ KP/Kirov party saturation is given on the basis of statistical reports available at TsGAIPD, f. 1012, op. 1, d. 480; op. 2, d. 1012; d. 1478, ll. 7, 14. The city-wide figure has been derived from the total membership numbers given in *Leningradskaiia Organizatsiia*, pp. 69–70 and the population estimates provided in I. I. Eliseeva and E. I. Gribovaia (eds.), *Sankt-Peterburg, 1703–2003: Iubileinyi statisticheski sbornik* (Saint-Petersburg: Sudostroenie, 2003), pp. 16–17.

⁴⁴ In 1941, the end-year of this study, there were 5,708 active PPOs in the entire Leningrad region, of which 1,967 operated in industrial, communications, transport and construction enterprises. At the same time, kolkhoz and sovkhoz PPOs amounted to 142 and 123, respectively. *Leningradskaiia Organizatsiia*, p. 130. The matter is further complicated if we consider the significant variation in social organisation that existed within the distinct parts of the Soviet population grouped together as 'rural'. One should be conscious about transposing the insights gained from the account offered in this book onto social contexts where the class categories of Marxism–Leninism bore little relevance to everyday life. The Bolsheviks themselves also had to confront this problem in designing and implementing policy in rural areas. Their shifting, contradictory policy towards the Cossacks during the Civil War is among the most striking examples. Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 166–205. Similarly, attempts to introduce collectivisation to small hunter–gatherer societies were derailed by the irrelevance to local conditions of theoretical categories derived from Russian agriculture. Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 187–264.

which the KP/Kirov PPO operated makes it possible to appreciate the ways in which its activities may have been similar or different to that of other organisations in both process and outcomes. In that regard, this book is grounded in a tradition of micro-historical scholarship that views the value of case-studies in their ability to illuminate macro-processes rather than represent social averages. KP/Kirov is an excellent point on which to focus a study of the Soviet endeavour to build a polity based on the industrial working class. Many findings of this book will likely apply to other factories of such scale. Others can and should be challenged and supplemented by studies of socialist construction in, for example, small workshops, rural settlements and white-collar working environments.⁴⁵

The argument is developed in a chronological narrative structure. Chapter 1 examines how the Bolsheviks attempted to rebuild their links with the industrial working class after the Russian Civil War. It considers the generalised sense of crisis within the Party generated by the precipitous fall in the urban population and the increasingly authoritarian direction of the Soviet state. Beginning with a discussion of the issues and outcomes of the Tenth Congress, the chapter moves on to show that the leadership decided to rebuild the Party's links with its proletarian constituency by means of a massive expansion in membership that irrevocably transformed the Bolsheviks. Chapter 2 considers how the factional struggles of the mid-1920s played out at the lower levels of the party apparatus, thus beginning the book's engagement with rank-and-file activity. It will show that the programmatic differences between the leadership under Stalin on the one hand and the oppositionist challenges led by Trotsky and Zinoviev on the other were seriously engaged with at the grassroots level, with the rank-and-file ultimately siding with the Central Committee. Chapter 3 examines how the political environment created on the ground during the factional struggle shaped the way the rank-and-file responded to the campaign of rapid industrialisation launched by the leadership in the late 1920s, playing a crucial part in mediating the myriad social tensions that emerged during that critical period. In industry, this resulted in the process of production becoming politicised, with far-reaching consequences for workplace relations.

⁴⁵ That the value of micro-historical research is not limited to typical or representative case-studies is a point that has been made by practitioners of micro-history in various areas. See indicatively Richard D. Brown, 'Microhistory and the Post-Modern Challenge', *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 1 (2003): 1–20; Carlo Ginzburg et al., 'Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It', *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 10–35; Marion W. Gray, 'Microhistory As Universal History', *Central European History* 34, no. 3 (2001): 419–31.

In Chapter 4, the book's focus shifts to the cultural and educational aspects of party activism, stressing its significance for acculturating the rank-and-file into Bolshevism. It will show that because of the important material dimensions of cultural activities, these too attracted the interest and efforts of grassroots communists who selectively engaged with this aspect of party policy in a way consistent with their concerns. Chapter 5 follows the party rank-and-file as it engaged with the democratisation campaigns surrounding the introduction of a new constitution in 1936. It shows that activists welcomed these initiatives as a way to strengthen their position relative to the state administrative apparatus, eventually becoming willing agents of the campaigns of repression that swept the country in 1937. Chapter 6 shows that, despite the disruption caused by mass repression, the leadership embarked on a renewed push for institutional renewal within the Party at the same time as it was trying to place the country's economic life on a military footing. The Conclusion offers some comments regarding the implications of the book's arguments for Soviet history beyond 1941 as well as the history of twentieth century communism more broadly.