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From Team-Stalin to Degenerate Tyranny

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This chapter analyses how the Stalin political leadership system worked and developed over time.[1] It presents data that show that for most of this period Stalin was quite collegial in the manner in which he made decisions, and interacted with his senior colleagues. But this changed over time as Stalin aged, and as the formal senior political elite around him also aged and became increasingly unrepresentative of the population, the party membership and the main elite groups. In his later years, this increasing alienation from the upper elite was compounded by a personal degeneration of Stalin's own mental capacities. This marked a transition from a collegial oligarchic approach, which I have dubbed 'Team-Stalin' to a degenerate tyranny.[2] The chapter analyses the scale and intensity of Stalin's interaction with other political figures, both on an informal basis in his Kremlin office, and in the formal elite decision-making bodies. The data on Stalin's private visitors that have been published are immense and rather daunting to use in their current form.[3] With one notable exception,[4] these data have mainly been used to check on individual contacts with Stalin. Some data on participation in elite decision-making institutions has also been published, and more data are available in the former party archives.[5] An additional source of information on Stalin's relations with the political elite comes from the several volumes of Stalin's correspondence, with different figures at different times.[6]

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the literature on Soviet political elites. It distinguishes between the formal ceremonial elite and the decision-making elite. There is a brief discussion of the different levels of the formal political elite and how they were involved in decision-making, in theory and in practice. The chapter then moves to consider the decision-making elite that was involved in the meetings in Stalin's office. The final section argues that, contrary to most accounts, the

upper formal elite was remarkably stable and static, and that it was the failure of this group to renew itself and become more representative of the larger elite that was the main problem, rather than the instability of the upper elite. It describes several key stages in the attempts to renew the upper elite and analyses the failure of each of them.

Different elites: formal and informal structures

In a sense, the whole of the membership of the Communist Party could be seen as a political elite. In his classical work on the history of CPSU membership, T. H. Rigby refers to the party as a formal 'representative elite',[7] which he distinguished from what John Armstrong described as the 'bureaucratic elite'[8] and what I will describe as the 'decision-making' elite. Sometimes the management and specialist elite is also referred to simply as the elite,[9] but that elite has to be distinguished from the political elites.

It is important to be aware of the difference between these concepts of political elite, and to be aware of their interrelationship. The formal political elite was fairly fixed and static. The Central Committee (TsK) and other elite committees (the party and state control committees and revision committees) were elected at the irregularly convened party congresses. The Politburo, Secretariat, Orgburo, and, until 1934, the General Secretary were elected at the first Central Committee plenum after the congress, with minor changes thereafter at other plenums. By contrast, the decision-making elite would change from day to day, and from issue to issue. The formal political elite contained certain figures for representative or ceremonial purposes. The decision-making elite did not carry ceremonial passengers.

Of course, the 'decision-making' elite was likely to be related to the formal political elite. Those who held real decision-making power would normally expect to be given some formal recognition of their elite status, but formal recognition often came late. Once achieved, however, formal recognition proved to be a little uncertain, and often remained so, even when its members were dropped from the decision-making elite that had warranted their formal promotion.

The formal structures claimed a degree of equality in political status among their members at the full Politburo and full Central Committee member level. The names of the members of the full Central Committee elected at the party congresses were always given in alphabetical order. There were 71 of them elected at the XVII party congress in 1934, with Stalin listed 56th and V. M. Molotov 43rd. The Politburo was

normally listed alphabetically and formally had equal rank. But the Central Committee plenum of February 1934 broke with these traditions temporarily. It listed the 10 Politburo members, the 10 Orgburo members and the 4 members of the Secretariat in non-alphabetical order, and at the same time failed to list a separate election of a General Secretary. The Politburo order was: Stalin, Molotov, L. M. Kaganovich, K. E. Voroshilov, M. I. Kalinin, G. K. Ordzhonikidze, V. V. Kuibyshev, S. M. Kirov, A. A. Andreev and S. V. Kosior. The Secretariat order was: Stalin, Kaganovich, Kirov and A. A. Zhdanov; and the Orgburo order was: Stalin, Kaganovich, Kirov, Zhdanov, N. I. Ezhov, N. M. Shvernik, A. V. Kosarev, A. I. Stetskii, Ya. B. Gamarnik and Kuibyshev. The non-alphabetical listing presumably referred to some form of ranking.[10] The primacy accorded to Stalin in these listings may have been intended to compensate for not listing him in a special position as General Secretary in 1934. In March 1939, following the XVIII party congress, the listing was again done alphabetically.[11] Of course, in practice, the relative importance of different members in the political decision-making elite had always been very different.

There were greater formal differences at the candidate levels, which were normally presented in rank order.[12] The order of the listing of the 68 candidate members of the Central Committee elected in 1934 showed V. P. Shubrikov, F. P. Gryadinskii and G. N. Kaminskii as the top 3 ranked candidates, with V. V. Osinskii listed 33rd, N. I. Bukharin 59th, A. I. Rykov 65th and M. P. Tomsky 67th. The 61 members of the Commission of Party Control (KPK) elected in 1934 were listed alphabetically after the first 8, who comprised the chair and presidium of KPK and were, in order: Kaganovich, Ezhov, M. F. Shkiryatov, E. M. Yaroslavskii, I. A. Akulov, Ya. K. Peters and D. A. Bulatov. The 70 Commission of State Control (KSK) members elected at this time were also listed alphabetically after the first 12, who were their chair and presidium, in order: Kuibyshev, N. K. Antipov, Z. M. Belen'kii, N. M. Antselovich, A. I. Gaister, G. E. Prokof'ev, G. I. Lomov, A. M. Tsikhon, R. S. Zemlyachka, I. M. Moskvin, B. A. Roizenman and N. A. Bogdanov. But the 22 Central Revision Commission members elected in 1934 all appear to have been listed in rank order, with V. F. Vladimirskii ranked first. The candidates elected by the first plenum to the Politburo, Secretariat and Orgburo were also normally presented in ranking order.

If we take the members of these party elite bodies that were elected at the party congresses to be the formal elite, for 1934 we would get a formal party elite of 292 (or 288 if we exclude the multiple membership of Kaganovich, Ezhov, Kuibyshev and Antipov). All members of the formal

elite are fairly well identified and they can be analysed regarding the length of their party membership (*stazh*), turnover and career movements.[13] The remarkable thing about this formal political elite was the continued predominance of pre-1917 *stazh* in the upper formal elites of the 1930s, the 1940s, and even the early 1950s, despite the extreme unrepresentativeness of these groups in the party membership and middle elite groups (see Table 3.1).

The informal decision-making elite can be seen as all the individuals who participated in the drafting and discussion of draft decrees that were ultimately accepted by the Politburo. The main figures in this elite would attend the formal sessions of the Politburo and be involved in co-ordinating the work of the redrafting commissions, which would probably require meetings with Stalin in his office. But they were not necessarily members or candidate members of the Politburo, and need not have been members of the Central Committee. It is presumed that the lists of those attending the meetings in Stalin's office, and of those attending formal Politburo sessions, provide an insight into the actors involved in the formal and informal decision-making processes.

Graeme Gill, in his analysis of *The Origins of the Stalinist Political System*, demonstrated an awareness of these different types of elite and the complexity involved in trying to define them when he wrote: 'The boundaries of the elite were neither clearly defined nor impervious to influences from below. In institutional terms, the elite encompassed members of the leading organs of the party–state structure, Sovnarkom, the Politburo, CC and upper levels of the party apparatus and the control commission.'[14]

Table 3.1 The share of those with pre-1917 party membership (*stazh*) in the formal party elite bodies and in the party as a whole (percentages)

	Pb	Pbc	TsK	TsKc	TsKK/KPK/KSK	All party members
1927–30	100	100	100	82	60	1
1930–34	64	100	100	99	62	
1934–39	56	100	100	94	45	
1939–52	89	50	37	27	43	0.3
1952–56		33	0	10	1	

Sources: Party *stazh* of all office holders from the stenographic records of the party congresses. Party *stazh* of all party members 1927 from *Vsesoyuznaya Partiinaya Perepis' 1927goda*, vyp. 6 (Moscow 1927), pp. 10–11. And, for 1939, from RGASPI, 17/7/186 l. 23.
Note: Pb = full member of Politburo; Pbc = candidate member of Politburo; TsK = full member of Central Committee; TsKc = candidate member of Central Committee; TsKK/KPK/KSK = member of Central Control Commission prior to 1934, and then either a member of the Commission of Party Control or the Commission of State Control.

Other scholars have been less cautious and more categorical in their assessments of what constituted the political elite. John Löwenhardt equated the 130 individuals who held full or candidate membership of the Politburo from 1919 to 1991 as being the 'commanding height' and the ultimate decision-making group:

> Politburo decisions both determined the country's direction and settled differences between powerful organisations such as the party apparatus, the military, or the KGB. Ultimately, it was the Politburo that decided *who got what, when and how* in the Soviet Union. It was the Politburo that decided on the most important personnel changes in all sectors of Soviet society, including the Communist Party.[15]

More recently, Evan Mawdsley and Stephen White have defined the Soviet elite as being the 1,932 individuals who over the period 1917–91 were members (full and candidate) of the Central Committee. They justify this decision in the following way:

> the Central Committee was not [just] a collection of individuals; it was a collection of people holding the positions that the regime itself defined as the most important. The CC was, for this reason, a collection of the politically influential by virtue of the positions they occupied – the government ministers and regional first secretaries, the ambassadors, generals and policemen, the editors, the leaders of trade unions and the directors of the largest enterprises, the leaders of organized youth, the President of the Academy of Sciences and an occasional writer.[16]

Part of the rationale of the Mawdsley/White approach to the definition of the elite, is their acceptance of the 'job-slot' theory of Robert V. Daniels. They quote approvingly Daniels' statements that there was an 'organic and automatic connection between [a] specific set of offices and the Central Committee status of their incumbents', and agree with him that the Central Committee could be seen accordingly as a 'well-defined and quite stable set of leading job slots whose occupants enjoyed the elite status conferred by Central Committee membership as long as and only as long as they occup[ied] their respective offices.'[17]

Both the accounts of Löwenhardt and of Mawdsley/White are highly formal and static in terms of their definitions of political elite. They take the elite to be those who are recognized formally as being in the elite without any consideration as to whether there could be any difference

between the ceremonial elite and the political, decision-making elite. It is presumed that Politburo and Central Committee decisions were the result of a process in which only formal elite members of the Politburo and Central Committee members were involved, and that they had their full say at the formal meetings, before democratically resolving the issue. This may have been the theory of Soviet decision-making, but how did it work in practice?

The formal party elite and how the Politburo worked in practice

It is generally accepted that after, the mid-1930s, Stalin tended to ignore the formal party elite structures. Party congresses, Central Committee plenums and formal sessions of the Politburo, Orgburo and Secretariat became less regular, and Stalin tended not to attend many of the latter. The decline in frequency of party meetings over this period is evident from the data in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 The Frequency of party congresses, Central Committee plenums, sessions of the Politburo, Secretariat and Orgburo, 1919–1952

Year	Party Congress	TsK ple-nums	Politburo			Secretariat and Orgburo			
			Proto-cols	Meetings		Proto-cols	Meetings		
				All	Stalin*		Sec.	Org.	Stalin*
1919	8th Cg		51	51	13				
1920	9th Cg, Cf	17	71	75	33				
1921	10th Cg, Cf, 11th Cg	7	180	180	85	116			
1922	11th Cg, 12th Cf	7	80	80	79	122	69	53	94
1923	12th Cg		79	79	66	91	53	38	45
1924	13th Cf, Cg	6	76	76	59	87	50	37	32
1925	14th Cf, Cg	3	54	54	46	75	38	37	33
1926	15th Cf	5	75	75	53	81	41	40	10
1927	15th Cg	5	67	67	45	78	38	40	4
1928		3	53	53	51	87	43	44	13
1929	16th Cf	2	51	51	49	85	41	44	1
1930	16th Cg	1	39	38	30	61	29	32	0
1931		2	58	57	47	59	28	29	0
1932		1	45	43	30	49	32	17	0
1933		1	24	24	16	23	7	12	0
1934	17th Cg	2	20	18	14	20	1	12	0
1935		3	17	15	15	23	1	12	0

1936		2	9	9	7	21	0	13	0
1937		3	12	6	6	13	0	6	0
1938		1	10	4	4	18	0	11	0
1939	18th Cg	1	13	2	2	32	0	14	0
1940		2	14	2	2	42	0	14	0
1941		2	10	0	0				
1942			4	0	0				
1943			3	0	0				
1944			2	0	0				
1945			4	1	1	49			0
1946		1	8	6	6	44			0
1947		1	5	1	1	46			0
1948			5	0	0	70			0
1949		1	6	1	1	66			0
1950			7	0	0	68			0
1951			6	0	0	57			0
1952	19th Cg	1	5	0	0				
All			1163	1068		1583			232
Percentage		85				71.3			14.9

Sources: 1927–40 compiled from E. A. Rees, 'Stalin, the Politburo and Rail Transport Policy', in J. Cooper, M. Perrie, E. A. Rees, (eds), *Soviet History, 1917–1953: Essays in Honour of R. W. Davies* (Basingstoke, 1995), pp. 106–8; Other years from: RGASPI, 17/3/1–1096; G. M. Adibekov, K. M. Anderson, L. A. Rogovaya (eds), *Politburo TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b); povestki dnya zasedanii 1919–1952, Katalog v trekh tomakh* (Moscow, 2000–2001).
Notes: Cg = Party Congress; Cf = Party Conference. List of plenums is not complete.
*Stalin's attendance at meetings of the Politburo.
**Stalin's attendance at meetings of the Secretariat and Orgburo.

From 1917 to the mid-1920s, party congresses were held annually, plenums of the Central Committee were held almost every two months, formal meetings of the Politburo were held more than once a week, and formal meetings of the Orgburo and Secretariat after 1922 were held almost weekly. After 1922, Stalin attended most of the formal Politburo, Orgburo and Secretariat sessions. From the late 1920s through to the mid-1930s, the frequency of party congresses dropped to every three years, the frequency of Central Committee plenums dropped to every six months, and the frequency of formal meetings of the Politburo to every three weeks, with a similar frequency for formal meetings of the Orgburo, but with far fewer formal meetings of the Secretariat. Stalin continued to attend most Politburo meetings, but almost no formal meetings of the Orgburo and Secretariat. This pattern held through the late 1930s. But during the war years there were no party congresses, very few Central Committee plenums, and the Politburo virtually ceased to exist. There were attempts to revive formal Politburo meetings after the war, but there were few plenums and no more party congresses until the

XIX congress in October 1952. The final months following this congress saw the replacement of the Politburo by the larger Presidium, and a drastic last minute attempt to radically transform the system.

The literature on the decision-making elite, and on its decision-making role, is far less than for the formal elite and its formal role. Mawdsley and White have little to say about the role of their elite in decision-making. Löwenhardt did attempt to look into this, explaining that 'the Politburo used to make two different kinds of decision: decisions reached in sessions of the bureau (averaging about ten per session during the 1930s) and so called decisions by circulation or polling (*oprosom*).' Löwenhardt suggests that the decisions taken at meetings 'presumably were the most important and controversial issues', and that taking just ten items per meeting 'allows for some discussion on each individual issue'.[18] He further noted that: 'The policy was to reach decisions without having to put motions to the vote – that is, by consensus. Many draft decisions were prepared in the Secretariat under the supervision of the Secretary-General and the other secretaries, and discussed in a secretaries' meeting before they reached the Politburo agenda.'

Löwenhardt appears to have been guided by Bazhanov's account of his time as Politburo Secretary in the early 1920s, when the system was being established and when Bazhanov claimed that he was drafting most of the complex materials in the Secretariat.[19] If this had been the case, then the Politburo would only have been rubber-stamping these decisions and then logically the Secretariat rather than the Politburo would have been the real decision-makers.

Thanks to the opening up of the party archives we now have a much better idea of how the Politburo worked, and it differs from the way that Löwenhardt describes in several respects: it was more complex than Löwenhardt had assumed, and it changed significantly over time.

The role of the formal Politburo meetings appears to have been much less than was often presumed. The formal Politburo sessions by the early 1930s were largely a switching and recording mechanism. No question would be considered by the Politburo in its formal sessions unless it was already accompanied by a draft resolution, and that draft resolution had to be supplied by those who presented the question to the Politburo.[20] Often this was a state agency, although it could be a senior political figure. It was not the task of the Central Committee Secretariat from the late 1920s and 1930s to prepare initial drafts of resolutions for discussion by the Politburo. The Secretariat normally took over when an initial draft had already been prepared. It was the Secretariat's role to

decide how to handle those questions and draft resolutions, which were handed in for consideration by the Politburo. They could either present them to the next formal session of the Politburo or circulate them to members for resolution. When the Politburo considered any question and draft resolution it generally had a limited number of choices: (a) it could accept the resolution; (b) it could reject the resolution and send it somewhere else for redrafting with resubmission to the Politburo (either in a formal session or by circular) or elsewhere; (c) it could reject the resolution outright, not bother with any redrafting and simply take the matter off the agenda; or (d) it could order the matter to be held over to another session (*otlozhen*).

The conventional view that formal Politburo sessions actually involved the drafting of Politburo decisions and resolutions rarely corresponded to reality already by the late 1920s. In a few cases, the General Secretary might have gone over the material quickly with his pencil, making minor changes before the meeting and a few more minor changes might be entered during the meeting, but most matters of substance would be left to a specially constituted redrafting commission. At the formal Politburo session there might be a brief discussion of what needed to be changed and who else consulted, and then the draft would go off with the instruction to redraft and return in five or so days.[21] The returned draft might be discussed at another formal Politburo session, or it might simply be circulated for comments. If the draft was considered to be acceptable it would be approved (*prinyato*). The formal sessions of the Politburo therefore had two tasks: first to act as a switching device to route the redrafting if necessary of proposals, and second to accept formally and record those documents that had been approved earlier through the circulation mechanism.

Over time, and as the workload increased, the kinds of decisions taken in the Politburo's name changed. As Table 3.3 shows, there was a move away from decisions taken at formal Politburo sessions, with more decisions being taken by the semi-formal polling (*opros*) of its members, or in the informal meetings from which decisions (*reshenie*) emerged.

The size of the formal sessions (with as many as 60–70 people attending to discuss over 100 agenda items) indicates that these were less decision-making sessions and more ceremonial registration sessions. The Table 3.4 provides an indication of the large numbers of politicians who were involved in the formal Politburo ceremonies in the early and mid-1930s. The number of participants was to drop significantly in the late 1930s, and the role of the Politburo was effectively taken over by the

Table 3.3 Change in the types of decisions issued in the name of the Politburo, 1919–1952

Year	Politburo			Pb agenda items				Total cols 5&6
	proto-cols	Meetings		Resolved At sess	Other	Of which Reshen	Opros	
		All	Stalin					
1919	51	51	13	404				404
1920	71	75	33	1 037				1 037
1921	71	80	80	1 404	187		187	1 591
1922	80	80	79	1 295	299		299	1 593
1923	79	66	91	1 322	203		203	1 525
1924	76	76	59	1 284	582		582	1 866
1925	54	54	46	860	798		798	1 658
1926	75	75	53	995	662		662	1 657
1927	67	67	45	1 066	732		732	1 798
1928	53	53	51	982	876	141	735	1 858
1929	51	51	49	1 069	1 182	554	628	2 251
1930	39	38	30	1 089	1 775	966	809	2 866
1931	58	57	47	1 303	2 577	1 041	1 536	3 878
1932	45	43	30	1 446	2 259	149	2 110	3 705
1933	24	24	16	443	2 802	31	2 771	3 245
1934	20	18	14	309	3 627	100	3 527	3 945
1935	17	15	15	105	3 366	6	3 360	3 471
1936	9	9	7	88	3 279		3 279	3 367
1937	12	6	6	23	3 403	217	3 186	3 425
1938	10	4	4	19	2 016	165	1 851	2 185
1939	13	2	2	6	3 074	2 899	175	3 080
1940	14	2	2	8	3 293	3 293		3 301
1941	10	0	0		2 618	2 618		2 618
1942	4	0	0		1 211	1 211		1 211
1943	3	0	0		1 151	1 151		1 151
1944	2	0	0		908	908		908
1945	4	1	1	6	918	918		924
1946	8	6	6	21	1 084	1 084		1 105
1947	5	1	1	3	1 041	1 041		1 044
1948	5	0	0		1 137	1 137		1 137
1949	6	1	1	3	2 398	2 398		2 401
1950	7	0	0		2 811	2 811		2 811
1951	6	0	0		3 214	3 214		3 214
1952	5	0	0		1 785	1 785		1 785
All	1 054	955	781	16 590	57 268	29 838	27 430	74 015

Sources: RGASPI, 17/3/1–1096; G. M. Adibekov, K. M. Anderson, L. A. Rogovaya (eds), *Politburo TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b): povestki dnya zasedanii 1919–1952, Katalog v trekh tomakh* (Moscow, Rosspen), 2000–2001.

Notes: Cols. 5–8 all refer to Politburo agenda items.
Col. 5 are decisions resolved at sessions of the Politburo.
Col. 6 are decisions resolved other than at sessions of the Politburo (given in cols 7 and 8).
Col. 7 are decisions taken by 'decisions' (resheniya) of the Politburo.
Col. 8 are decisions taken by polling the Politburo members (opros).

Table 3.4 Participation in Politburo meetings: average numbers attending per session in each year, 1922–1949

Year	Pb	Pbc	TsK	TsKc	TsKK	Other	All	Pb as % of all*
1922	6	1	2	0	0	0	9	66.7
1923	5	3	3	0	2	0	13	38.5
1924	4	3	6	0	2	0	15	25.0
1925	5	4	7	2	4	1	23	21.7
1926	7	3	11	4	5		30	23.3
1927	5	3	7	3	4		22	22.7
1928	6	3	15	7	6		37	16.2
1929	7	3	16	10	6		42	16.6
1930	7	5	22	11	15		60	11.7
1931	8		20	18	12		58	13.8
1932	7	1	26	21	12		67	10.4
1933	8	1	24	25	11		69	11.6
1934	7	1	15	17	13		53	13.2
1935	8	2	20	18	18		66	12.1
1936	8	0	25	18	21		72	11.1
1937	9	2	21	6	21		59	15.3
1938	9	5	13	3	5		35	25.7
1939	7	2	3	1	2	37	52	13.5
1940	7	2	21	5			35	20.0
1945	8	4	4	1		2	19	42.1
1946	8	4	7	1		1	21	38.0
1947	9	3	6	2			20	45.0
1949	8	1	9	3			21	38.1

Sources: 1922–29 Calculated from data in RGASPI, 17/3/1–770.
1930–40: Calculated from data in O. V. Khlevnyuk, A. V. Kvashonkin, L. P. Kosheleva, L. A. Rogovaya (compilers), *Stalinskoe Politburo v 30-e gody: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1995), pp. 183–255.
1945–52: O. V. Khlevnyuk, I. Gorlitskii, L. P. Kosheleva, A. I. Minyuk, M. Yu. Prozumenshchikov, L. A. Rogovaya, S. V. Somonova (eds), *Politburo TsK VKP(b) i Soviet Ministrov SSSR, 1945–1953* (Moscow, 2002), pp. 421–31.

Note: *Average number of full members of the Politburo attending each Politburo session.

State Defence Committee (GKO) in 1941, before a partial resurrection in the post-war period and the transformation into the Presidium in 1952. In Table 3.4 we see a substantial change over time in the officials who participated in the formal meetings of the Politburo, as between full and candidate members of the Politburo and Central Committee, members of TsKK (KSK and KPK) and other officials.

Following the acceptance of a draft resolution, parts of it (a '*pripiska*') would be sent by the Secretariat to whoever needed to receive it. It was sent by special service and the *pripiska* was to be returned. After the formal session, the protocols and resolutions would be listed and sent to all Central Committee members, again with instructions that they be returned to the Secretariat after perusal. Some resolutions would be published as Central Committee resolutions, some as joint Central Committee–Sovnarkom resolutions, and some would be published as Sovnarkom resolutions, with no indication that they had been redrafted by the Politburo. Many resolutions would not be published at all, and would be given different security classifications, from 'for official use only', to 'Secret', 'Completely Secret', and 'special file' (*osobaya papka*).[22]

Clearly, the switching and confirmation work undertaken by the formal Politburo sessions was only part of the decision-making process, with the initial drafting being made mainly in state agencies, and the redrafting carried out in specially constituted redrafting commissions. There was a vast amount of work involved in this. Stalin needed to keep in touch in some way with all the work and redraftings that were constantly taking place. Many of his office meetings would be involved in briefing and being briefed by those who were involved centrally in this work. This would be the hub of real decision-making, and those involved in doing this would be the real decision-making elite rather than the formal elite.

The real decision-making elite: inside Stalin's office

The system was dominated by Stalin, but despite the popular image of the dictator imposing his will on others, the record of his private meetings indicate that in the 1930s and early 1940s, Stalin had a very broad circle of acquaintances, and he spent a considerable time meeting and working with others. The record of the private meetings is greatly at variance not only with this popular image of Stalin, but also with the observable fate of the formal institutions of political interaction – the formal sessions of the Politburo, Secretariat and Orgburo, the Central Committee plenums, conferences and congresses.

The findings of our research suggest that Stalin was for most of his active political life a party animal. He appears to have thrived on social interaction. His working style was as part of a working collective or editorial team, rather than as a 'loner'.[23] But this interaction was in relatively small working groups rather than in the larger sessions of the formal Politburo or the other party institutions, which, after all, had

been created by Lenin and not by him. Stalin was thus a very distinctive type of party animal, and for purposes of political decision-making, he would make his own working group, rather than be dominated by the pre-existing political institutions.

As we shall see below, the periods of reduced participation in Politburo meetings between 1936 and 1940, and between 1941 and 1945, were precisely the period when the business meetings in Stalin's office increased. It seems that what was desired was not less participation in elite decision-making, but more controlled participation.

In direct contrast to the tendency for decreased frequency of Stalin's interactions in formal Politburo sessions with the political elite, we can identify an increasing level of interaction with the informal political elite in Stalin's business meetings in his Kremlin office. This intensity of these meetings continued throughout the war, before reducing in the post-war period. As a rough guide to the chronological changes in the intensity of meetings we consider the time spent on these private business meetings and the number of people involved.

Time spent in business meetings in Stalin's Kremlin office

Between 1930 and 1953, Stalin devoted a considerable amount of his time in Moscow to seeing a large number of visitors in his office. It can be calculated that, for the entire period, he saw visitors on about 40 per cent of all days.[24] But for many of these years Stalin had rather long holidays; an average of 63 days per year for the entire twenty-five years from 1928–53, or as much as ninety-three days per year for the seventeen years in which summer holidays were taken. Consequently, it appears that Stalin saw visitors on almost a half of all his working days. Table 3.5 provides an indication of the changing number of days per year on which Stalin saw visitors, the lengths of his holidays and the share of visitor days to Moscow work days. The increase in his workdays between 1937 and 1945 is explained by the fact that in these years he did not take his customary lengthy summer vacation. The years of most intense activity, implied by Stalin's meetings with visitors, were 1937, 1939 and 1942.

We know that Stalin continued to be involved in politics, and to see and communicate with others, while he was on holiday. Unfortunately, we do not yet possess any detailed listings of Stalin's meetings with others while on holiday.[25] The records of the meetings in Stalin's Kremlin office represent only a fraction of the complex of political interactions in which Stalin was involved. These data are incomplete, but they still offer a far more complete picture of the nature of Stalin's political interactions, at specific times and over time, than is otherwise available.

Table 3.5 Number of days per year that Stalin received visitors, 1930–1953

	Visitor days	Holidays	Work days	Visitor days/ work days (%)	Ranking	
					Highest	Lowest
1930	103	83	282	36.5		4
1931	167	66	299	55.9	7	
1932	161	90	276	58.5	6	
1933	164	58	307	53.4	8	
1934	140	94	271	51.7		
1935	126	85	280	45.0		
1936	116	73	293	39.7		
1937	241	0	365	**66.0**	2	
1938	178	0	365	48.8		
1939	250	0	365	**68.5**	1	
1940	214	0	366	58.6	5	
1941	217	0	365	59.5	4	
1942	231	0	365	**63.3**	3	
1943	180	0	365	49.3		
1944	151	0	366	41.4		6
1945	145	70	295	49.2		
1946	102	104	261	39.1		5
1947	136	104	261	52.1		
1948	125	90	276	45.5		
1949	111	99	266	41.7		7
1950	62	143	222	27.9		3
1951	47	154	211	22.3		2
1952	37	101	265	14.0		1
1953	9	0				
All	3 413	1 414	6 987	48.9		

Source: Calculated from data in *Istoricheskii Arkhiv, 1994–1998*. See http://www.history.unimelb.edu.au/Russia.

In different years, both the length of holidays and the proportion of workdays on which Stalin received visitors changed. Generally, the relationship between Stalin's holidays and his office meetings both changed in the same direction: those years in which Stalin did not take a long summer holiday were also those in which he saw visitors on a maximum proportion of working days – that is, up to 69 per cent in 1939 – while those years in which he had the longest holidays were also those in which he received visitors on a minimal proportion of working days. In other words, there are no signs of any attempt to make up for lost time on long holidays by having an increasing share of visitor days on these lower number of working days. Similar factors appear to apply to the vacation period as to the work period.

In total, Stalin probably saw about 2,800 separate individuals in his office. The registers record about 30,000 separate entries of names with times, and so, on average, it can be calculated that each visitor attended about ten times. But in reality there were generally a small number of visitors who were seen very regularly, and a much larger number of less frequent visitors. On average, Stalin would normally see between forty and seventy individuals per month in the 10–20 days a month in which visitors were received. He received the lowest number of visitors in his final years. He received visitors on only 14 per cent of workdays in 1952, 22.3 per cent in 1951 and 27.9 per cent in 1950. The highest number of visitors was received in 1939 (68.5 per cent), followed by 1937 (66 per cent), 1942 (63.3 per cent), 1941 (59.5 per cent), 1940 (58.6 per cent), 1932 (58.5 per cent), 1931 (55.9 per cent) and 1933 (53.4 per cent).

Who were Stalin's visitors?

Most of the visitors were received in groups, and often several of Stalin's senior colleagues would be present. Most of Stalin's closest colleagues with regard to these business meetings were Politburo members, but the rank order of closeness (frequency and duration of visits) did not follow party rank strictly. The registers indicate that Stalin had meetings with about 2,800 individuals in his private office, for a total of about 10,800 hours. Some of these people only met Stalin once, but others met him far more frequently. We shall begin by considering the fifteen most frequent of Stalin's visitors.

The fifteen most frequent visitors

Table 3.6 presents the rank order of Stalin's closest colleagues in terms of business meetings throughout the entire period. It indicates the extent to which these meetings were held with full Politburo members. Molotov, who was by far Stalin's most frequent visitor, had meetings with Stalin 2,927 times, for a total of 8,169 hours, and was present for 76.5 per cent of all Stalin's official meetings. Molotov's position was, of course, exceptional. It was exceptional in both the large number of contacts hours with Stalin, as well as for the continuous nature of this close business relationship, which only began to break down in late 1952 and 1953.

Below Molotov come a group of individuals who also experienced long periods of close business contact with Stalin. These were Malenkov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich and Beria, with an overall rate of 29–33 per cent. But this table is somewhat misleading, as it privileges those who

Table 3.6 The top fifteen visitors according to contact hours in meetings with Stalin, 1930–1953

Name	All			Pb member		
	Rank	Hours	% of all	Hours	Rank	Notes
Molotov	1	8 169	76.6	8 169	1	
Malenkov	2	3 535	33.1	1 127	5	First meetings 1937
Voroshilov	3	3 484	32.7	3 484	2	
Kaganovich	4	3 329	31.2	3 329	3	
Beria	5	3 059	28.7	1 080	6	
Mikoyan	6	2 664	25.0	2 313	4	
Zhdanov	7	1 833	17.2	1 019	7	Died 1948
Bulganin	8	1 066	10.0	619	9	
Ezhov	9	1 062	10.0	0		Shot 1940
Ordzhonikidze	10	984	9.2	984	8	Died 1937
Vasil'evskii	11	822	7.7	0		d.hd Gen.Staff 1941–42
Voznesenskii	12	798	7.5	490	12	Shot 1949
Andreev	13	708	6.6	492	11	
Khrushchev	14	656	6.2	600	10	
Antonov	15	589	5.5	0		1st d.ch Gen.Staff 1942–43

Source: Project Data Base at Melborune University. http://www.history.unimelb.edu.au/Russia.
Notes: Pb member hours refers to number of hours the individual met with Stalin while he held full Politburo rank.
d.hd Gen.Staff 1941–42 – deputy head of the General Staff 1941–42.
1st d.ch Gen.Staff 43–3 – first deputy chairman of the General Staff 1942–43.

had a long-term experience as visitors. Table 3.7 presents an indication of the ranking of the individuals who had the greatest number of hours of meetings with Stalin over a year-long period. Table 3.7(a) considers the number of cases with individuals appearing more than once, while Table 3.7(b) considers the individuals only. An indication of how these participation rates changed over time is provided in Table 3.8. These figures indicate that the presumption made by Löwenhardt, White and Mawdsley that importance in decision-making would be reflected in party rank, and that the members of the formal elite would lose this elite status once they stopped being important decision-makers, is manifestly false.

While Molotov's continued high decision-making profile from 1931 to 1952 corresponds to his senior Politburo ranking in these years, his fall from decision-making importance in 1953 was not reflected in his fall

Table 3.7 Top ten cases of the greatest number of contact hours in meetings with Stalin over a year-long period, as a percentage of all meeting times

Name	Rank	Year	Percentage of all hours	Number of hours and minutes
(a) Cases and individuals				
Malenkov	1	1951	97	91:30
Malenkov	2	1950	96	69:15
Malenkov	2	1952	96	115:10
Beria	4	1951	94	88:35
Molotov	5	1948	93	290:25
Molotov	6	1951	92	86:40
Malenkov	7	1949	90	205:50
Molotov	8	1938	89	502:35
Molotov	10	1937	87	721:26
Molotov	10	1950	87	104:15
(b) Separate individuals				
Malenkov	1	1951	97	91:30
Beria	2	1951	94	88:35
Molotov	3	1948	93	290:25
Bulganin	4	1949	84	192:05
Khrushchev	5	1951	80	76:00
Kaganovich	6	1933	76	447:55
Mikoyan	7	1948	74	231:45
Zhdanov	8	1948	67	208:10
Ezhov	9	1937	66	544:10
Voroshilov	10	1936	62	214:26

Source: Project Data Base at Melbourne University. http://www.history.unimelb.edu.au/Russia.

from the Politburo and the Central Committee. For some reason, Stalin preferred to abolish the Politburo and turn it into a larger assembly than to replace the main survivors of the original team: Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Andreev and Mikoyan. Voroshilov and Kaganovich, who both underwent severe losses of decision-making importance respectively in 1945–48 and 1942–47, retained their Politburo status. Mikoyan was more important as a decision-maker in the famine years of 1933, when formally he was only a candidate member of the Politburo, than he was in the immediately following years of 1934–38 when he was a full member. Kalinin's importance in decision-making fell enormously after 1936, but he maintained full Politburo status until he died in 1944. Rudzutak was more important as a decision-maker in 1932–34, after he had been transferred to TsKK and lost his Politburo status in February 1932, than he was as a Politburo member in 1931.

Table 3.8 Annual changes in ranking of the top eight politicians according to contact hours with Stalin in his Kremlin office, per year, 1931–1953

	Total hours	1st rank (%)	2nd rank (%)	3rd rank (%)	4th rank (%)	5th rank (%)	6th rank (%)	7th rank (%)	8th rank (%)
1 The original Team-Stalin									
1931	407	Mol 54	Kag 40	Vor 15	Ord 15	And 10	Mik 8	Kui 8	Kal 5
1932	478	Mol 64	Kag 53	Ord 27	Kui 24	Vor 22	Mik 18	And 6	Kir 6
1933	589	Mol 82	Kag 76	Vor 30	Mik 23	Ord 21	Kui 17	And 12	Kal 10
1934	501	Mol 68	Kag 67	Zhd 56	Vor 48	Ord 38	Kui 31	Mik 20	Kal 16
1935	398	Mol 79	Kag 65	Ord 57	Vor 54	Ezh 23	Kal 19	Mik 18	And 18
1936	343	Mol 86	Vor 62	Ord 51	Kag 48	Ezh 23	Mik 19	Chu 19	And 16
2 The threat of the Ezhov ascendancy									
1937	828	Mol 87	Ezh 66	Vor 55	Kag 49	Zhd 18	And 17	Mik 16	Mal 10
1938	566	Mol 89	Ezh 53	Vor 46	Kag 38	Mik 17	Mal 16	And 12	
3 The fall of Ezhov									
1939	931	Mol 85	Vor 59	Mik 33	Kag 27	Zhd 26	Ber 19	Mal 9	And 9
1940	740	Mol 81	Vor 54	Zhd 25	Sha 26	Ber 25	Kul 23	Mik 20	Vas 16

4 The advance of Malenkov, Beria and the generals

1941	792	Mol 61	Mal 49	Ber 28	Vor 21	Mik 16	Tim 16	Shak 16	Zhu 15
1942	1 009	Mal 74	Mol 71	Ber 53	Vas 39	Vor 20	Zhu 19	Bok 18	Mik 12
1943	669	Mol 81	Mal 72	Ber 64	Ant 35	Vor 31	Shc 30	Sht 18	Zhu 17
1944	471	Mol 81	Mal 51	Ant 45	Ber 44	Shc 33	Sht 32	Mik 21	Vor 15
1945	441	Mol 69	Mal 45	Ber 42	Sht 30	Bul 29	Ant 28	Mik 20	Vor 9
1946	295	Mol 68	Ber 53	Mal 52	Mik 42	Zhd 38	Bul 18	Vos 10	Khr 6
1947	342	Mol 74	Vos 74	Ber 73	Mal 72	Mik 66	Zhd 59	Bul 18	Kos 17
1948	311	Mol 93	Ber 75	Mik 74	Mal 71	Voz 71	Zhd 67	Bul 61	Kag 59

5 The Malenkov ascendancy

1949	227	Mal 90	Bul 84	Ber 81	Mik 73	Mol 72	Kag 65	Voz 26	Vor 10
1950	120	Mal 96	Mol 87	Ber 82	Mik 73	Bul 73	Khr 66	Kag 65	Kos 55
1951	94	Mal 97	Ber 94	Mol 92	Khr 80	Kag 75	Bul 72	Mik 64	Vor 16
1952	73	Mal 94	Mol 75	Bul 75	Ber 70	Mik 60	Kag 57	Khr 55	
1953	26	Mal 40	Ber 19	Bul 19	Khr 17	Vas 10			

Source: http://www.history.unimelb.edu.au/Russia.

Notes: Total time of meetings in hours; ranking according to percentage of all time.
Key: A = Andreev; Ant = Antonov; Ber = Beria; Bok = Bokov; Bul = Bulganin; Chu = Chubar'; Ezh = Ezhov; Kag = Kaganovich; Kal = Kalinin; Khr = Khrushchev; Kir = Kirov; Kos = Kosygin; Kui = Kuibyshev; Kul = Kulik; Mal = Malenkov; Mik = Mikoyan; Mol = Molotov; Ord = Ordzhonikidze; Sha = Shaposhnikov; Shak = Shakhurin; Shc = Shcherbakov; Sht = Shtemenko; Tim = Timoshenko; Vas = Vasil'evskii; Vor = Voroshilov; Voz = Voznesenskii; Zhu = Zhukov; Zhd = Zhdanov.

Perhaps the most revealing case is that of Ezhov, who was attending up to 23 per cent of all of Stalin's meetings when he had no Politburo rank in 1935, and was to outstrip all of Stalin's other colleagues, apart from Molotov, in 1937, when he attended up to 66 per cent of all of Stalin's meetings (544 hours) with only candidate Politburo ranking. Of course, it could be argued that had he maintained that rate of decision-making importance, he could have expected to achieve full Politburo rank in the future, but, as was soon to become clear, he did not have a future. The failure of Ezhov to reach full Politburo rank should not lead us to think that he was lower in the real decision-making elite than such full Politburo members as Kalinin or Andreev.

Zhdanov, Malenkov and Beria were even more extreme cases. Zhdanov in 1934 was attending 56 per cent of the meetings in Stalin's Kremlin office when he was appointed to the Secretariat, but had no Politburo status, and Malenkov in 1942 and 1943 was attending over 70 per cent of Stalin's meetings when he had only been made a candidate member of the Politburo in 1941 and would not become a full member until 1946. Beria also rose to a level of attending 64 per cent of Stalin's office meetings in 1943, and only received Politburo status in 1946. The latter was to some extent accompanied by loss of direct control of part of the security apparatus, which is often seen as the beginning of the challenge to his authority, rather than as a confirmation of his power.

In most cases in the 1920s and 1930s, new formal Politburo status was given to the ranking candidate members who had been elected at the previous party congress, when new vacancies arose. The chair of the party's Central Control Commission (TsKK) before 1934 was an exceptional position; the post gave its incumbent the equivalent of Politburo rank, and required him to attend formal Politburo sessions, but did not formally give him Politburo status. However, once removed from the Control Commission position, the former incumbent would normally regain full Politburo rank.[26]

The consolidation of decision-making elite status into formal elite status often took time, and membership of the formal elite was normally quite uncertain. Once formal elite status had been reached, it tended to cling. Professor Rigby was right in describing Stalin as generally a 'loyal patron' to those who had made it into the elite of Team-Stalin Politburo. There were, however, a few exceptions: Ezhov and Voznesenskii are the most striking ones, and their history will be discussed in more detail later. Let us now turn to consider the job profile of Stalin's visitors.

Job profiles of Stalin's visitors: Politburo, military, state security organs and the government (Sovnarkom/Council of Ministers)

When White and Mawdsley refer to the elite as simply a collection of job slots they are implying a very static model with an organic link between employment structure and the elite. There are very good reasons, in terms of promoting social stability, in projecting this image of a representative elite, but in terms of real decision-making power, we need to question whether such linkage is real, or whether it is simply part of the political show. Here I shall sketch out briefly the main patterns of involvement in decision-making by members of different groups. The next section will be concerned more directly with how these patterns changed over time, and what effects this had.

Many of the visitors, especially the most important ones, had more than one job. This applied particularly to Politburo members. We therefore need to be very careful, in assessing the shares of visitors, as to how we classify these dual positions. In Table 3.9, two versions have been calculated, with Molotov, Voroshilov and Beria included in one version and excluded in the other. The heavy representation of Politburo members in Sovnarkom presents additional problems, of which we need to be aware, but no attempt will be made in this table to exclude Politburo members from the Sovnarkom group, apart from Molotov. For the military, and particularly the security agencies, there is less of a problem. In Table 3.9, the meetings of Politburo members with Stalin have been given in total on the left, and exclude the participation of Molotov, Voroshilov, and Beria once he had become a Politburo member in 1946.

Prior to December 1930, Stalin and the party Secretariat did not have hands-on control of the central government apparatus, which had developed its own internal bureaucracy under Lenin and Rykov. But from December 1930, when Molotov replaced Rykov as chairman of Sovnarkom and STO, hands-on control shifted to the Stalin team.

From January to November 1930, before becoming head of Sovnarkom, Molotov was only present at 4 of the 88 private meetings in Stalin's Kremlin office. But in December 1930, Molotov was present for 11 of the 15 meetings (that is, 73 per cent), and this was to be roughly the average share of meetings that Molotov was to attend for the next twenty years.[27] This intense Stalin/Molotov consultative relationship was the major constant feature of the Stalinist decision-making interrelationship. As can be seen from Table 3.8 on pp. 96–7, this relationship changed only slightly during these twenty years. There was to be a far more dramatic change in the final five months of Stalin's life,

Table 3.9 Share of participation in meetings with Stalin by the major figures in the leading military, party, security and state agencies (preliminary figures in percentage)

	Pb		Military		State Security		Sovnarkom/SovMin	
	All	ex.MVB		ex.V		ex.B	ch & v.ch	ex.Mol
1931	43.9	28.5	6.3	1.2	6.4	6.4	32.8	20.9
1932	41.1	28.1	5.8	2.8	5.2	5.3	34.1	24.5
1933	40.8	26.0	6.9	2.4	6.8	6.7	36.2	26.1
1934	46.9	34.5	7.5	2.3	8.1	8.1	32.9	26.1
1935	43.1	29.7	8.1	2.5	9.3	9.3	30.6	22.7
1936	44.4	27.4	10.5	3.5	7.6	7.6	33.8	23.8
1937	62.4	40.6	12.4	3.7	13.3	13.3	41.5	28.4
1938	68.1	45.0	10.9	2.5	14.4	14.4	43.2	28.5
1939	56.4	32.5	22.7	13.2	7.8	7.8	46.2	31.8
1940	43.9	25.7	28.4	22.1	6.4	6.4	36.0	24.2
1941	36.0	25.7	32.3	30.0	7.9	7.9	28.0	20.1
1942	36.3	26.0	34.3	31.7	8.7	8.7	29.9	22.0
1943	40.0	27.3	35.3	31.9	10.7	10.7	27.2	17.9
1944	46.7	33.9	40.8	38.8	11.0	11.0	30.2	19.4
1945	49.0	37.9	23.0	21.8	10.6	10.6	37.3	27.3
1946	52.6	34.2	12.1	11.4	12.1	2.6	35.2	27.0
1947	62.9	45.0	5.9	4.9	12.3	3.3	44.5	36.6
1948	73.2	53.2	10.3	9.0	11.1	2.0	55.6	46.0
1949	72.5	52.4	14.1	12.5	12.9	2.7	59.8	51.6
1950	68.0	47.7	15.6	14.3	12.5	2.9	48.6	39.3
1951	71.8	50.5	13.6	11.9	12.1	1.7	49.1	39.9
1952	68.6	51.8	11.9	10.9	12.1	3.5	43.3	36.1
1953jf*	44.9	27.0	9.0	9.0	21.8	3.8	15.4	15.4
All	50.5	31.5	19.1	14.9	8.7	3.6	36.8	27.1

Source: Calculated from data in different issues of *Istoricheskii Arkhiv, 1994–8*. See Project data bases. http://www.history.unimelb.edu.au/Russia.
Notes: ex. MVB = excluding Molotov, Voroshilov and Beria; ex.V = excluding Voroshilov; ex.B = excluding Beria; ch & v.ch, chairman and vice chairman; Ex Molotov excluding Molotov.
* 1953jf = 1953, January–February.

after October 1952, but for the preceding 240 months this relationship was the anchor of Stalinist politics.

If the transfer of Sovnarkom and STO decision-making to the Stalin team lay at the centre of the patterns of meetings between Stalin and Molotov, we might expect that changes in the roles of his deputy chairs in Sovnarkom and STO would also find a reflection in these meetings. And this is reflected in the Sovnarkom/Council of Ministers column in

Table 3.9. There was clearly a decline in importance of Sovnarkom/Council of Ministers meetings during the Second World War, when Stalin paid more attention to military matters, but the proportions then rose again to well over 50 per cent in the post-war period, apart from the uniquely different trend of Stalin's last months.

The dynamic of the meetings with the military leaders is very interesting. From levels of less than 10 per cent of meetings before 1935 (including Voroshilov) or 3 per cent (excluding Voroshilov), the level of meetings with the military grew sharply to over 30 per cent in 1941. Of course, there was some slight decline in 1938, but far less than might have been expected, given the magnitude of the military purges. And from 1939 to 1941 there was a very sharp increase in involvement, especially for the indicators excluding Voroshilov. The level of military participation in meetings grew to a peak of about 40 per cent in 1944, from where they fell very sharply to about 5 per cent in 1947, before recovering slightly to 10–15 per cent in Stalin's last years.

The dynamic of meetings with state security officials was very different from the military, with many more irregularities. There was an increased involvement from 6 per cent in 1931 to over 9 per cent in 1935. There was then a reversal to 8 per cent in 1939–42. From 1942 there was a sharp increase in the participation of security officials, reaching 12–13 per cent from 1946 to 1952 when the figures which include Beria are considered.[28] It should be noted that at the time of Beria's maximum influence in political decision-making in these years (1946–52) the state security share at under 13 per cent was still lower than the 13.3 per cent and 14.4 per cent achieved in 1937 and 1938, respectively. However, the January/February 1953 figures show a leap in security official involvement to 21.8 per cent. This is largely the result of Beria's meetings with Stalin, but it is significant that the security figures excluding Beria were also climbing.

The overall trend is for an increase in the dominance of the Politburo and Sovnarkom/Council of Ministers (the formal structures) over time, but with a major growth in the importance of state security officials in 1937–38 and a growth of the military from 1939 to 1945.

What do the data show about the changing nature of Stalinist decision-making?

The evidence of the mass of social interaction and the predominance of group meetings described above require us to move away from the traditional image of the lone dictator reserving for himself jealously all

decision-making functions. This view is supported by the testimony of Boris Bazhanov, one of Stalin's early secretaries, who defected in 1928. In a remarkable exchange with Jerzy Urban in the 1970s, Bazhanov was insistent on recording his own account of Stalin's work style, even though it contradicted the pattern that his interviewer was determined to keep.

Bazhanov explained that

> Stalin had the good sense never to say anything before everyone else had his argument fully developed. He would sit there, watching the way the discussion was going. When everyone had spoken, he would say: Well comrades, I think the solution to the problem is such and such – and he would then repeat the conclusions towards which the majority had been drifting. And, as time passed, it came to be said of Stalin that…he had a fundamental wisdom of sorts which led him to propose the right answers to difficult problems.[29]

Later, Bazhanov explained that he often had to press Stalin for an urgent response to some issue, and that Stalin would often ask him his opinion as to what should be done, and then he invariably accepted it. These statements from Bazhanov were so much at variance with the image of Stalin held by Urban that he could not help commenting: 'So Stalin the single-minded usurper of all decision-making was not yet evident at the time?' To which Bazhanov replied: 'Not at all.'

It is also clear that, after Stalin's death and his last-minute attempt to make drastic changes to the political elite, the oligarchs of Team-Stalin were keen to support Western images of an isolated dictator who excluded them from discussions and knowledge of what was happening, and thereby also from responsibility. Molotov, Kaganovich, Malenkov, and especially Khrushchev, were eager to spread this image. The new post-Stalin orthodoxy, as expressed by the former Stalinist, Khrushchev, denied the existence of Team-Stalin:

> Stalin, who absolutely did not tolerate collegiality in leadership and in work, and who practiced brutal violence, not only toward everything which opposed him, but also toward that which seemed to his capricious and despotic character, contrary to his concepts.[30]

If we maintain a sceptical position regarding this politically convenient orthodoxy of 'the lone dictator' and accept the evidence of considerable group participation, then the problems for Team-Stalin would appear to be not so much individuals challenging Stalin's authority, but of a

Team-Stalin that was reluctant to renew its own membership and become more representative of younger generations.

This is very different from the image presented by George Kennan, of Stalin the tyrant murdering his own supporters.[31] Although some aspects of a tyrant did emerge in the latter, degenerate years, it is incorrect to claim that this was the norm for the entire Stalin period. Professor Rigby pointed out correctly many years ago that, in several respects, up to 1952 Stalin could be considered as being a loyal patron.[32] Perhaps even *too* loyal a patron.

There were several periods when major changes to the senior leadership of Team-Stalin were initiated. These were associated with a failed attempt to bring Kirov into the team more centrally in 1934; the disastrous consequences of drastically advancing the role of Ezhov in the team in 1936–38; the more successful, but temporary, wartime ascendancy of new military groups in 1941–45; and the attempts to revive the team around Zhdanov and Voznesenskii in 1946–48. Each of the earlier moves to renew the upper elite had been halted dramatically. Kirov had been assassinated, Ezhov had been sacrificed when it was felt that the purges had gone too far, the military had been dismissed when the war was over and it was felt that they might pose a threat, and Zhdanov had died. Following the halting of all of the earlier attempts at change and renewal of the leadership, there had been a reversion to the old team of the four oligarchs (Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov and Mikoyan). But by the late 1940s even the old team realized that they needed some renewal, and that they would have to make space for some younger figures such as Malenkov, Beria, and even Khrushchev and Bulganin. After 1949, as Stalin's health deteriorated[33] there were signs of a new team being built around Malenkov. Beria was at first included in the new team, but by 1952, it was clear that he was losing influence and that his future was under threat.[34] Following the XIX party congress in October 1952, Stalin demonstrated that he had a far more radical plan in mind that would destabilize all the oligarchs and bring much younger generations of leaders into both the formal and informal leadership. Only then, twenty years after Trotsky had claimed that the party leadership was being swamped by new post-revolutionary generations of leaders, did the Old Bolsheviks, or pre-revolutionary *stazh*, stop being a majority of the formal elite.

Conclusions

The early Stalin decision-making system was more complex than has often been presumed. There was an important difference between the rather static formal political elite that continued to dominate the

Politburo, and the dynamic, decision-making elite that formed around Stalin. For most of this period, through to the end of the Second World War, Stalin had meetings with many people in consultative and even collegial-type decision-making processes. This early period may be represented as a sort of Team-Stalin period, with a consultative bureaucratic oligarchy; although one of the oligarchs was far more important than the others. This Team-Stalin period included the period of the Ezhovshchina, for which the whole Team needs to some extent to be held responsible. Ultimately, the Ezhovshchina and Ezhov's advance in the informal elite caused the other oligarchs to take action to persuade Stalin to abandon Ezhov. There are good reasons why the surviving Stalinist oligarchs should, after Stalin's death, want to present themselves as victims of rather than active participants in this system. But the evidence for the 1930s and early 1940s does not support these claims.

The political situation in the late 1940s and early 1950s clearly changed from the early period, and even from the wartime period when Stalin was still on top of matters, and anxious to hear the opinions of his colleagues and to use their input. In his last years, Stalin adopted far more classical dictatorial attitudes. The formal meetings of the Politburo ceased. He cut back drastically on his informal meetings. He had longer holidays and increasingly relied on Malenkov, Beria, Bulganin and the old-team to run matters in his absence. But at the same time, he grew increasingly unhappy with this dependency, and began to take erratic and tyrannical decisions. It was in these circumstances, and only at the end of a very long term of office, that Stalin finally decided to abandon Team-Stalin.

Notes and references

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2. This was a transition that only occurred in Stalin's final years, although many of his colleagues (the oligarchs) subsequently found it to their advantage to claim that it had always been there.
3. *Istoricheskii Arkhiv*, 1994, no. 6; 1995, nos 2, 3, 4, 5–6; 1996, nos 2, 3, 4, 5–6; 1997, no. 1; and a summary alphabetical index in 1998, no. 4.
4. Professor Oleg Khlevnyuk listed the number of visits and duration of visits between 1931 and 1939 in appendix 4 to his monograph on the Politburo: O. V. Khlevnyuk, *Politburo, mekhanizmy politicheskoi vlasti v 1930-e gody* (Moscow 1996), pp. 289–91.

5. See O. V. Khlevnyuk, A. V. Kvashonkin, L. P. Kosheleva and L. A. Rogovaya (compilers), *Stalinskoe Politburo v 30-e gody: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow 1995), pp. 183–255; O. V. Khlevnyuk, Y. Gorlitskii, L. P. Kosheleva, A. I. Minyuk, M. Yu. Prozumenshchikov, L. A. Rogovaya, S. V. Somonova (eds), *Politburo TsK VKP(b) i Sovet Ministrov SSSR, 1945–1953* (Moscow, 2002), pp. 421–31; and RGASPI, 17/3/ 1–770.
6. Parts of Stalin's correspondence with his wife, his mother and children are given in V. N. Denisov, (ed.), *Iosif Stalin v ob'yatiyakh sem'i: Iz lichnogo arkhiva* (Moscow, 1993). Extracts of Stalin's correspondence with Molotov from 1925–1936 have appeared in L. T. Lih, O. V. Naumov and O. V. Khlevnyuk, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov, 1925–1936* (New Haven, Conn. and London, 1995). A more comprehensive and informative listing of Stalin's correspondence with Kaganovich, 1931–36 has appeared as O. V. Khlevnyuk, R. W. Davies, L. P. Kosheleva, E. A. Rees, L. A. Rogovaya (eds), *Stalin i Kaganovich: perepiska, 1931–1936 gg*. (Moscow, 2001). Correspondence between Stalin and other members of the political elite has appeared in *Bol'shevistskoe Rukovodstvo. Perepiska. 1912–1927*, (Moscow, 1996) and *Sovetskoe Rukovodstvo. Perepiska. 1928–1941* (Moscow, 1999).
7. T. H. Rigby, *Communist Party Membership in the USSR, 1917–1967* (Princeton, NJ, 1968), ch. 14: 'A Representative Elite?'.
8. Ibid., p. 412. References to John Armstrong, *The Soviet Bureaucratic Elite: A Case Study of the Ukrainian Apparatus* (New York, 1959).
9. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Stalin and the Making of a New Elite, 1928–1939', *Slavic Review*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1979, pp. 377–402.
10. Note that Kuibyshev ranked above Kirov in the Politburo order, but below him in the Orgburo order.
11. See *Pravda*, 23 March 1939.
12. The rationale for this goes back to pre-revolutionary underground days, when it was expected that many of the full members of the TsK would be arrested and would need to be replaced by the reserve team, who were the candidate members. Replacements would occur automatically from the most senior candidate on the reserve list. Hence it was important for all members to know the rank order of the candidates.
13. Elite members were almost invariably delegates or candidate delegates to the party congress that elected them. Certain details including party *stazh* of delegates were always listed in the stenographic records of the party congresses.
14. Graeme Gill, *The Origins of the Stalinist Political System* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 51.
15. J. Löwenhardt, J. R. Ozinga and E. van Ree, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Politburo* (New York, 1992), p. xvi.
16. E. Mawdsley and S. White, *The Soviet Elite from Lenin to Gorbachev: The Central Committee and its Members, 1917–1991*, (Oxford, 2000), p. vii.
17. Ibid., p. x, citing from Robert V. Daniels, 'Office Holding and Elite Status: The Central Committee of the CPSU', in Paul Cocks, R. V. Daniels and Nancy Whittier Heer (eds), *The Dynamics of Soviet Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), p. 76.
18. Löwenhardt *et al.*, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Politburo,* p. 116.

19. Boris Bazhanov, *Vospominaniya byvshego sekretarya Stalina* (St. Petersburg, 1990). This is a reprint of the 1960s revised version of a book originally published in Paris in 1930. Bazhanov died in 1982.
20. The formal decrees describing the form in which materials and draft proposals need to be submitted to the Politburo are given in O. V. Khlevnyuk, A. V. Kvashonkin, L. P. Kosheleva and L. A. Rogovaya (compilers), *Stalinskoe Politburo v 30-e gody: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1995), pp. 23–5.
21. This system certainly bears some resemblance to the process that Bazhanov claimed to have introduced into Politburo procedures in the early 1920s, but in the later years as the Politburo workload had increased, the redrafting was entrusted to a series of *ad hoc* drafting commissions rather than to one secretary. See Bazhanov, *Vospominaniya*…(St. Petersburg, 1990), pp. 48–62.
22. Again, it is interesting to note that Bazhanov claims to have invented the *Osobye papki* system in November 1923. See Bazhanov, ibid., p. 69. However, Bazhanov claims that during the civil war, when the future of the regime was unclear, there were even more secret decisions, such as the decision to store confiscated gems in the hands of especially trusted party members for their use should the regime fall. Bazhanov claims to have discovered accidentally that Yan Sverdlov's widow, Klavdiya Novgorodtseva, was one of these secret bearers. See Bazhanov, ibid., p. 96. The first reference to *Osobye papki* in the Politburo protocols is on 31 May 1923.
23. This should not surprise us if we consider that, for Stalin and most of the Bolsheviks, editorial work was almost the only legal activity that they knew.
24. He received visitors on 3,437 of the 8,462 days between January 1930 and March 1953 – that is, on 40.6 per cent of the days.
25. We know that Voroshilov was a frequent visitor in the early 1930s, and that Zhdanov was there in 1936, as well as in the post-war years. Beria was also there in the 1940s.
26. Rudzutak was to some extent an exception. When he was removed from TsKK in March 1934 he only regained candidate Politburo status; however, at the same time, NKRKI/TsKK was reorganized and the new incumbent of KPK (Kaganovich) did keep his Politburo status.
27. See Table 3.6; between 1930 and 1953 Molotov had meetings with Stalin in his private office for 8,169 of the 10,668 hours that Stalin had meetings there – that is, 76.6 per cent.
28. Since Beria was made a candidate member of the Politburo in 1946, there could be an argument for deducting him from the security column and adding him to the Politburo column, but that would lead to a sharp decline in the security figures, which seems unwarranted.
29. Interview between Bazhanov and G. R. Urban in G. R. Urban (ed.), *Stalinism: Its Impact on Russia and the World* (Aldershot, 1982), p. 8.
30. Khrushchev, *The 'Secret' Speech* (Nottinghan, 1976), p. 24.
31. George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (London, 1961), pp. 254–5, wrote one of the best known descriptions of Stalin as 'a man of incredible criminality…without pity or mercy: a man in whose entourage no one was ever safe: a man who…was most dangerous of all to those who were his closest collaborators in crime, because he liked to be the sole custodian of his own secrets'.

32. T. H. Rigby, 'Was Stalin a Disloyal Patron?', *Soviet Studies*, vol. XXXVIII, no. 3, July 1986, pp. 311–24.
33. He was then 71 years old. Djilas provides us with one of the best accounts of Stalin's sudden deterioration in these years: '[In 1948] It was incomprehensible how much he had changed in two or three years. When I had last seen him, in 1945, he was still lively, quick-witted, and had a pointed sense of humour. But that was during the war, and it had been, it would seem, Stalin's last effort and limit. Now he laughed at inanities and shallow jokes. On one occasion he not only failed to get the political point of an anecdote I told him in which he outsmarted Churchill and Roosevelt, but I had the impression that he was offended, in the manner of all old men. I perceived an awkward astonishment on the faces of the rest of the party', Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (London, 1962) p. 138.
34. The arrest of Abakumov in July 1951 and the prosecution of the Mingrelian Affair were clear signs that Beria's future was under threat. Beria's meetings in Stalin's office fell from 94 per cent of all meetings in 1951 (ranking him second only to Malenkov) to 70 per cent in 1952, ranking him fourth behind Malenkov, Molotov and Bulganin. See Table 3.8.