‘Stalin’s Solution to the Nationalities Issue’:  
The General Secretary’s Editing of the  
1938 *Short Course* on Party History  
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The central text of the Stalin-era canon, the *Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)* was compulsory reading for Soviet citizens in all walks of life between 1938 and 1956, with over forty million copies of the textbook being published in the USSR during this time.\(^1\) Originally attributed to an anonymous Central Committee commission, the *Short Course* was rumored to have been ghostwritten by Stalin himself from the start. Eight years later, as the general secretary’s cult of personality ascended to new heights after the Second World War, official communiqués confirmed this speculation and credited him with the book’s authorship.\(^2\) In the years since, many commentators have continued to assume that Stalin wrote the text, some going so far as to argue that the *Short Course* ought to be read as an autobiography of sorts.\(^3\) Others, following revelations made by N. S. Khrushchev during his 1956 “Secret Speech,” have considered Stalin’s role to have been more editorial, with the exception of a single section in the textbook’s fourth chapter devoted to dialectical materialism.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) See T. Zelenov, “Bibliografiiia,” *Bol’shevik* 23 (1949): 89-90; “Slovatskii narod izuchaet marksizm-leninizm,” *Izvestiia*, 19 October 1949, 3; etc. For publication data, see the serial *Knizhnaia letopis’*.


\(^4\) “O kul’te lichnosti i ego posledstviakh:’ Doklad Pervogo sekretaria TsK KPSS tov. Khrushcheva N. S. XX s”ezdu Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza 25 fevralia 1956 go 1a,” in *Doklad N. S.*
Archival evidence declassified in the late 1990s now reveals that although Stalin did not actually write the *Short Course* himself, he played an enormous role in its creation. Not only did he supervise the refinement and periodization of party history during the early-to-mid 1930s, but he literally took charge of the *Short Course*’s editing during the summer of 1938, interpolating tens of thousands of words into the text and excising tens of thousands more.

A rather arcane debate at first glance, the question of Stalin’s participation in the creation of the *Short Course* is actually of considerable importance. Controversy, for example, surrounds the role played by ideology within the Soviet experience. If early postwar Sovietologists tended to look to ideology to explain the idiosyncrasies of this state and society, successive generations of revisionist and post-revisionist scholars have redirected the field toward the study of more pragmatic political practices (e.g. factionalism, patron-client networks) and normative socio-cultural dynamics (upward mobility, everyday life, etc.). New work on the *Short Course* like the present article redirects the attention of the field back to ideology by demonstrating the high priority that the party placed on issues aside from *realpolitik* and political pragmatism.

Aside from ideology, this new work on the *Short Course* also sheds light on how the party leadership regarded the Bolshevism, the Soviet “experiment” and the legacy of the revolution some twenty years after 1917. During the summer of 1938, Stalin literally rewrote many of the USSR’s founding myths, recasting the early revolutionary movement, historic interparty rivalries, the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power and the formation and development of the Soviet state. Perhaps most dramatic was his revision of the sagas of collectivization, industrialization and the Great Terror, but he also thoroughly reframed the history of the Komsomol, Comintern and Soviet foreign policy. This article

*Khrushcheva o kul’te lichnosti na XX s’ezde KPSS—dokumenty*, ed. K. Aimermakher (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2002), 51-119, here 105-106.
focuses on Stalin’s revisions to the history of Soviet nationality policy in order to better understand the disquieting silence which enveloped this issue in the wake of the purges. Twenty-five years ago, Gerhard Simon provocatively referred to the vanishing of this regime priority from public view as “Stalin’s solution to the nationalities issue;” today it is finally possible to investigate the nature of that silence through the general secretary’s editing of the Short Course.5

Origins of the Short Course

Along with nationality policy, ideological education and indoctrination were major Bolshevik priorities from the early days of the revolutionary movement. They underwent thorough reorientation after the party’s seizure of power in 1917, and again at both the beginning and the end of the 1920s.6 Perhaps the greatest watershed that pertains to the origins of the Short Course, however, was Stalin’s 1931 letter to the journal Proletarskaia revoliutsiia, which denounced party historians and their ideological work and announced the need for a new approach to popular indoctrination that would emphasize its accessibility and mobilizational potential. What was needed was something akin to what Henry Steele Commager has referred to as a “usable past”—the recasting of party history in an instrumental, inspirational light.7 Heroes were to stand out within this new narrative, distinguished by both word and deed. Villains too were to be treated in detail—both conventional class enemies and double-dealers within the party and its


socialist rivals. Major accomplishments of Soviet power—e.g. socialist construction, the emancipation of women, the advancement of non-Russian nationalities, etc.—were likewise to be celebrated as party history. In the wake of this intervention, however, the general secretary and his comrades-in-arms were surprisingly vague about what precisely they expected from the historical discipline and even leading party historians such as E. M. Iaroslavskii and V. G. Knorin struggled to bring the existing canon into conformity with the party’s new demands. Their marginal results, in turn, precipitated incessant complaints from the grassroots, where each new edition of the canon’s central texts was found to be schematic, inaccessible and uninspiring.8

As is well known, the Kirov murder in December 1934 provided Stalin with a casus belli against the remnants of the Zinov’evite opposition. Less well known is the fact that the murder also served as a premise for renewed intervention within the party educational system. Official calls in January 1935 demanded all indoctrinational efforts to henceforth be structured around the Bolsheviks’ historic struggle with internal party opposition.9 Frustration with the ideological establishment’s slow pace of reform quickly led to further intervention. Stalin called for party historical work to shift its focus from the prerevolutionary period to the post-revolutionary era. He and his comrades broke up A. I. Stetskii’s massive Central Committee department of culture and propaganda into smaller entities to allow for better supervision and control. An array of new resolutions were issued by the Central Committee calling for sweeping changes within the party’s indoctrinational programs. Finally, the party hierarchy commissioned a series of new

curricular materials, including a flagship textbook to be jointly written by Knorin, Iaroslavskii, and P. N. Pospelov.\textsuperscript{10}

If these measures in some senses signaled a fresh start, in others they spoke of continued confusion on the ideological front. Four years after Stalin’s letter to \textit{Proletarskaia revoliutsiia}, the party hierarchy had decided to place responsibility for its new initiatives in the hands of three individuals who had repeatedly failed to deliver results in the past. True, all were quintessential insiders: Knorin had just been appointed deputy chief of Stetskii’s new Agitprop apparatus; Iaroslavskii sat on several prominent editorial boards and the Party Control Commission; and Pospelov edited the journal \textit{Bol’shevik} along with the other two. But as these historians’ previous attempts to design breakthrough textbooks indicate, none of them had the slightest idea about how to combine the party hierarchy’s demands for an accessible, animated historical narrative with a sophisticated treatment of Marxism-Leninism. Predictably, although this troika succeeded in cobbling together a massive new two-volume text by the end of 1935, their manuscript—\textit{The History of the ACP(B): A Popular Textbook}—failed to satisfy the party’s demands for a didactic work that would rally opinion at the grassroots. Stalin’s dismissal of the text left its authors little choice but to return to the drawing board in search of a truly popular approach to party history.\textsuperscript{11}

The party hierarchy’s search for a usable past was further complicated during the second half of 1936 by the advent of the Great Terror, which quickly consumed many of

\textsuperscript{10} Stalin expressed his exasperation with the ideological establishment at a meeting of the Orgburo in March 1935—see RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1118, l. 99. See also Central Committee resolutions “O sozdanii v gorkakh VKP(b) otdelov partkadrov,” \textit{Pravda}, 28 March 1935, 2; “O reorganizatsii Kul’tpropa TsK VKP(b),” \textit{Pravda}, 14 May 1935, 1; “O propagandistskoi rabote v blizhaishee vremia,” \textit{Pravda}, 15 June 1935, 1; Stetskii to Stalin (8 June 1935), RGASPI, f. 17, op. 163, d. 1066, ll. 118-119; Stetskii to Stalin (15 June 1935), f. 71, op. 3, d. 62, ll. 287-285; Iaroslavskii to Stalin (2 June 1935), f. 558, op. 11, d. 843, ll. 7-8.

\textsuperscript{11} Little archival evidence survives that can characterize this fiasco. Hints are visible in RGASPI, f. 558, op. 3, d. 74; \textit{Soveschchanie po voprosam partiinoi propagandy i agitatsii pri TsK VKP(b), 4-7 dekabria 1935 g.} (Moscow, 1936), 10, 29, 135; “O partiinoi propagande: rech’ sekretaria TsK VKP(b) tov. A. Andreeva na otkrytii Vysshei shkoly propagandistov im. Ia. M. Sverdlova pri TsK VKP(b), 7 fevralia 1936 g.,” \textit{Pravda}, 26 February 1936, 2.
the historic personalities who were expected to populate the Soviet pantheon of heroes. Worse, as the Terror mounted, so too did calls from all levels of the party organization for a canonical textbook that could serve as an almanac or reference book in troubled times.\textsuperscript{12}

Stalin stoked this sense of ideological panic in his infamous speech at the party’s 1937 February-March Central Committee plenum, where he blamed the rank-and-file’s lack of vigilance on their poor understanding of the official line. “Master Bolshevisim,” he commanded. Prioritize “the political training of our cadres.” These demands contributed not only to the tension in the air, but to a formal resolution calling for further educational reforms.\textsuperscript{13}

Stalin capitalized on this mandate shortly after the plenum’s conclusion, forwarding a proposal to the Politburo for a two-tier system of “Party” and “Leninist” courses that he wanted discussed that April.\textsuperscript{14} Two resolutions emerged from the eventual April 16 Politburo session, the first ratifying Stalin’s condemnation of all existing party history textbooks and the second establishing a commission to organize his two-tiered system of political education courses and identify the curricular materials that these courses would require. Iaroslavskii and Knorin were commissioned not only to revise their earlier, now-obsolete party history textbooks for the lower-tier “Party” courses, but to supply along with Pospelov a new flagship text for the upper-tier courses as well.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Iaroslavskii reports being repeatedly asked about new textbooks whenever he gave public talks during these years—see RGASPI, f. 89, op. 8, d. 807, l. 4.


\textsuperscript{14} Orgburo resolution of March 25, 1937 “O vypolnenii reshenia Plenuma TsK ob organizatsii partiinykh kursov, leninskikh kursov i kursov po istorii i politike parti,” RGASPI, f. 17, op. 114, d. 800, l. 1.

\textsuperscript{15} Politburo resolution of April 16, 1937 “Ob uchebnike po istorii VKP(b),” RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 3212, l. 27; Politburo resolution of April 16, 1937, “Ob organizatsii kursov usovershenstvovaniia dla partkadrov, soglasno rezoliutsii poslednego plenuma TsK(b) po punktu 4 poriadka dnia plenuma,” RGASPI, f. 17, op. 114, d. 800, l. 2; Politburo resolution of May 11, 1937 “Ob organizatsii partiinykh kursov,” RGASPI, f. 17, op. 114, d. 840, ll. 46-48.
No sooner had this troika begun work, however, than it was blindsided by Knorin’s arrest that June—“a Polish and German spy,” Stalin would later claim. Evidently consumed by panic, Iaroslavskii hastily submitted to the general secretary a manuscript that he had been revising for the lower-tier courses. In an accompanying letter, Iaroslavskii claimed that he had been focusing all of his energies on this work (a poorly concealed attempt to distance himself from the fallen Knorin) and announced his readiness to begin the more advanced, upper-tier text with Pospelov. Unfortunately, Iaroslavskii’s bloated 800-page typescript turned out to be quite problematic (although not in regard to the national question) and this stymied both further progress that summer and the launch of Stalin’s political educational courses that fall.

Evidently frustrated with the situation, it was only in late August or early September that the party hierarchs finally conceded that they had few options other than to ask Iaroslavskii for a complete rewrite. Eager to avoid the fate of his late colleague, Iaroslavskii agreed and was joined for the revisions by Pospelov and a team of specialists from the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute (IMEL). That said, the sheer scale of the redrafting meant that the manuscript took nearly six months to return to the party hierarchy—now in its second incarnation and retitled History of the ACP(b): A Short Textbook. Stalin set some time aside that March after the conclusion of the 1938 Third Moscow Trial to work through the galleys and issued a number of recommendations in

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16 Knorin was arrested on June 22; for Stalin’s comment on espionage, see diary entry from November 7, 1937 in Georgi Dimitrov, Dnevnik (9 Mart 1933—6 Fevuari 1949) (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo “Sv. Kliment Okhridski,” 1997), 128.
17 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, dd. 1203-1207; Iaroslavskii to Stalin (1 July 1937), RGASPI, f. 558, op. 1, d. 1203, l. 1. A Politburo resolution passed days after Knorin’s arrest had reassigned responsibility for the flagship textbook to Iaroslavskii and Pospelov—see Politburo resolution of June 28, 1937 “Ob uchebnikakh dlia leninskhikh kursov,” RGASPI, f. 17, op. 114, d. 840, l. 49.
18 See RGASPI, f. 558, op. 3, d. 381; op. 11, d. 1219, ll. 21-35.
19 Pospelov mentions this recommendation in an undated letter to Iaroslavskii and Stetskii written during late 1937—see RGASPI, f. 629, op. 1, d. 64, l. 73; also ll. 74-77, 79-84.
20 Iaroslavskii to Pospelov (13, 19 September 1937), RGASPI, f. 629, op. 1, d. 5, ll. 5-6.
21 See RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1208, ll. 2-295; also Orgburo resolution of February 16, 1938 “Voprosy ‘Partiinykh kursov,” RGASPI, f. 17, op. 114, d. 840, l. 32.
the form of handwritten notes and marginalia. Many of these suggestions and corrections have not survived, but those that do—concerning the manuscript’s conclusion—demonstrate all the hallmarks of the omnipresent conspiracy that dominated Soviet ideology that spring:

1) All non-com[munist] parties in the working class—the SRs, Mensheviks, Anarcho-Syndicalists, and so on—became counter-rev[olutionary] bourgeois parties even before the Oct[ober] Revolution and thereafter turned into agents of intern[ational] espionage agencies.

2) All oppositionist currents within our party turned—the Trotskyites, leftists, rightists (Bukharin-Rykov), “leftists” (Lominadze, Shatskin), “work[ers’] oppos[ition]” (Shliapnikov), Medvedev and others, “democr[atic] centralists” (Sapronov), and nationalists of every stripe and republic of the USSR—became enemies of the people and agents (spies) of intern[ational] espionage agencies in the course of the struggle.

3) How did this come about?
   a) These oppositionist currents were in [illegible].
   b) Then, having been defeated in an ideological sense and having lost their footing within the working class, they turned for aid to the imperialists and became spies in pay of their espionage agencies.22

This commentary reveals Stalin to have been virtually obsessed with the threat posed by the opposition. So much so, in fact, that much of the rest of the narrative appears to have escaped close scrutiny.

Late that March, Iaroslavskii resumed work on the manuscript along with Pospelov and a large brigade of historians from the IMEL. As Iaroslavskii later recalled: “Comrade Stalin provided a whole array of directions. A whole group took responsibility for these issues. Comrade Zhdanov even said along the way that ‘a whole collective farm’ had taken shape around the project.”23 They spent late March and early April focusing closely on the task at hand; Pospelov’s contributions during this time played such an important role that Iaroslavskii added his name to the title page as co-author. When they finally

22 All that survive are some 21 pages of typescript, marginalia, and notes. Stalin’s editing of his own notes are rendered here in struck-out text; his insertions appear in italics. RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 1217, ll. 25-46, here 26-28.
23 RGASPI, f. 89, op. 8, d. 807, l. 3.
completed the revisions and submitted their third and then fourth versions of the manuscript—now entitled *The History of the ACP(b): A Short Course*—to the party hierarchy, many associated with the project believed that it was ready for publication.24

*Iaroslavskii and Pospelov on the National Question*

Official commentary on the national question during the mid-to-late 1930s alternated between the celebration of the Friendship of the Peoples on one hand and the condemnation of bourgeois nationalism on the other. This line dated back to the party hierarchy’s decision between 1929-1933 to terminate the more ambitious, national communist experiments of the 1920s.25 And while celebrated programs associated with nationality policy during this period such as *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) survived the repression and continued to advanced non-Russian cadres into party and state service, they did so without the fanfare and triumphalist publicity of earlier years.26 Replacing this program in the official limelight were new stage-managed, public events organized around the Friendship of the Peoples slogan—republican culture weeks, conferences of non-Russian workers and party notables, central art exhibitions, folklore festivals and other Orientalized representations of ethnic advancement in the USSR.27 The limits of this new line on nationality policy were similarly defined in public by the exposure of

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24 Three copies of the third version’s galleys are at RGASPI, f. 558, op. 3, dd. 75-77; four copies of the fourth version’s galleys dating to April 24-26, 1938 are stored at f. 17, op. 120, d. 383. On Iaroslavskii’s speech, see f. 89, op. 8, d. 831, l. 1; also Zhdanov’s speech that June: f. 77, op. 1, d. 692, l. 175.

25 On the rising central concerns over national communism in the republics and the Ukrainian and Belorussian scandals that led to the termination of these experiments, see Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, chaps. 6-7, 9.


“bourgeois nationalists” in the press who had overstepped the bounds of permissible cultural expression and institution-building. So normative was this new public approach to the national question by 1937-1938 that Iaroslavskii and Pospelov made it a centerpiece of their new party history narrative.

The first chapter of Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s fourth version of the *Short Course* began with a brief introduction to party history before providing a more detailed sketch of Russian socio-economic underdevelopment during the nineteenth century. The legacy of serfdom weighed down heavily upon a large part of the population, especially the non-Russian peoples of the empire, who faced intensive russification in addition to other sorts of oppression. Iaroslavskii and Pospelov quoted Stalin as stating that imperial Russia was notorious for its “inhuman and barbarian treatment of the nationalities.”

Perhaps because of this double burden, many non-Russians of the Caucasus region responded enthusiastically to V. I. Lenin’s founding of the St. Petersburg League of
Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class in 1895. I. V. Stalin, A. G. Tsulukidze, V. Z. Ketskhoveli and others founded local Social Democratic organizations and then adhered closely to Lenin’s revolutionary line. Stalin and his comrades-in-arms in Tiflis, Baku and Batumi remained loyal to Lenin through his break with the Mensheviks in 1903 over the issue of party membership and discipline.

Iaroslavskii and Pospelov returned to the issue of the non-Russian nationalities as the 1905 Revolution neared, noting a rise in restiveness in the Caucasus, Poland and the Baltic provinces that echoed unrest to the north among Russian workers, peasants, university students and members of the urban and rural bourgeoisie. Moreover, it was the Baku party committee under Stalin’s leadership that touched off the revolution with a major strike in December 1904 that swept the empire like wildfire. Throughout 1905, the non-Russian peoples rebelled against tsarist authority in both urban and rural areas, dovetailing with more central risings but failing to fully synchronize their actions with the Russian Bolsheviks.

After the failure of the 1905 revolution, Stalin’s party organization in Baku proved to be one of the few capable of resisting the tsarist backlash. That said, even it gave ground, especially in the face of Menshevik treachery from within the Social Democratic movement. Stalin spoke out against this threat (as well as the one posed by the defeatist Bolshevik Otzovists) and endured frequent arrest and imprisonment from the tsarist authorities.

The national question returned to center stage in the narrative in 1913 during the debate over the platform of L. D. Trotsky’s August Bloc. According to their account, ever since the nineteenth century, the tsarist autocracy had pursued russificatory policies in regard to the non-Russian peoples of the empire, limiting the linguistic and cultural expression of people like the Ukrainians, while imposing even harsher restrictions upon the Jews. This led to the growth of nationalist sentiments under the influence of bourgeois
activists, who stressed the commonality of national interests in part to divide the increasingly internationalist non-Russian working class against itself.

According to Iaroslavskii and Pospelov, the Mensheviks and Jewish Bund supported these bourgeois nationalist calls for national-cultural autonomy. Rosa Luxemburg and Polish Social Democracy, by contrast, flatly denied the relevance of the national question to the revolution. The Bolsheviks struggled relentlessly against this bourgeois nationalism and national nihilism, defending each nation’s right to self determination and secession while arguing that states could counter such tendencies by ensuring equality. “Great Power” majorities were to be stripped of their privileges and national minorities liberated of their disabilities. Lenin and Stalin saw the downtrodden nationalities as allies in the coming revolution, moving the former to write several initial articles that the latter complemented with his famous 1913 article “Marxism and the National Question.”

On the eve of war in 1914, mounting unrest within the Russian working class and its allies in the non-Russian regions was growing reminiscent of 1905. Iaroslavskii and Pospelov noted that strikes in St. Peterburg and Moscow during that year were matched by walk-outs in Baku, Warsaw and Lodz. This activism, however, was eclipsed after the start of the First World War by a wave of populist patriotism—something which forced Lenin to reassess the situation and write *Imperialism, the Highest State of Capitalism* in 1916. Lenin’s position in this book on the national question inspired objections from N. I. Bukharin, Iu. L. Piatakov and K. B. Radek, who sided with Luxemburg against the notion of self-determination. Lenin and Stalin held firm, pointing out that such a position would deny the revolutionary movement natural allies within the colonial world.

By 1916, dissatisfaction with the war was again stimulating worker unrest in the central cities of the empire and on the national periphery, where Iaroslavskii and Pospelov quoted the masses as viewing imperial Russia as “a prison of peoples.” A Central Asian uprising in Kazakhstan that year proved threatening enough to require the most brutal of tactics to suppress.
After the February 1917 Revolution, Iaroslavskii and Pospelov noted that the national question again returned to the fore when the new Provisional Government refused to alter the tsarist line in regard to the non-Russian peoples, particularly in the Caucasus, Ukraine and Finland. Stalin presented a report on the issue at the Seventh Party Congress that April, detailing Lenin’s position on self-determination. Piatakov rose in rebuttal as he had in 1916, reiterating the position against minority rights that he shared with Bukharin. Lenin and Stalin again condemned this position, noting that it would undermine the revolution by alienating supporters from among the colonial peoples.

Following the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power in October, Iaroslavskii and Pospelov summarized the key issues that had laid the groundwork for revolution. Arguing that the Bolshevik position on the national question had been “of critical significance,” they added that

... after the October coup d’état, the “Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia” was published over Lenin’s and Stalin’s signatures. Recognition of the independence of Finland and Ukraine followed thereafter. Sovnarkom ratified Soviet power’s address “To All Working Muslims of Russia and the East,” prepared by Comrade Stalin. In this address it was noted that the Soviet power had decisively broken with the nationality policy of the tsarist regime and Provisional Government. A People’s Commissariat of Nationality Affairs was formed under Comrade Stalin. All the most important steps in the Bolshevik Party’s position on the national question before October were associated with Comrade Stalin’s name, as were all the issues associated with the party’s nationality policy that came after October 1917.

Optimism over these accomplishments was tempered just months later, however, when Bukharin and Trotsky’s objections to the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk led Germany to sever Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic provinces and Finland from the new Soviet Republic.

Iaroslavskii and Pospelov returned the nationality question in their treatment of the civil war, noting that nationalism in the non-Russian regions of the former empire now threatened to undermine the revolution. First, the newly independent Ukrainian Rada entered into an alliance with the Germans (who in turn quickly replaced the Rada with Hetman Skoropadsky) at the same time that the Finns too fell under German influence.
After the German withdrawal in late 1918, other bourgeois nationalists such as the Jewish Bund, Ukrainian Petliurites, Georgian Mensheviks, Azeri Mussavatists and Armenian Dashnaks took up arms against Soviet Power in league with foreign interventionists and the domestic Russian bourgeoisie and landowners. In the Caucasus, these alliances led to the landing of British forces, the oppression of local non-Russian workers and peasants and the infamous massacre of the 26 Baku commissars.

At the Eighth Party Congress in 1919, Lenin again returned to the importance of the nationality question in the struggle against world imperialism. Refuting Bukharin and Piatakov’s continued resistance to the idea of national self-determination, Lenin explained that the failure to support this principle in bourgeois areas like the newly-independent Finland risked alienating the native working class—precisely the allies that the Bolsheviks would needed in their revolutionary struggle there. This line won the support of the party congress in 1919 and the Second Comintern Congress in 1920. Iaroslavskii and Pospelov concluded the discussion by noting that Lenin had been right: support for self-determination played a major role in the Bolsheviks’ eventual victory in non-Russian areas.

Toward the conclusion of the civil war, interparty debates over party discipline and democratic centralism became a major concern. Some of the controversy over these issues stemmed from new recruits to the Bolshevik cause who had been until recently members of other parties—the Bor‘bists (the Ukrainian “Left” Socialist-Revolutionaries), the Borot‘bists (the Ukrainian Communists), the “Maximalists’ Union” and Poale Zion (the Communist Zionists). Here, Iaroslavskii and Pospelov warned that “in the main, these new arrivals, who were far from ready to surrender their petty bourgeois views, would eventually form the cadres of various factions and anti-party groups. The influence of petty bourgeois elements was especially felt in an array of party organizations in Ukraine, which according to its social makeup was more petty bourgeois that central Russia.”
Problems associated with non-Russian nationalism on the periphery persisted into the 1920s, as did the petty bourgeois attitudes of the Bolsheviks’ new non-Russian converts. At Stalin’s request, the Tenth Party Congress in 1921 turned again to the national question in order to augment the abolition of colonial oppression with the abolition of “the evil heritage of the past—the economic, political and cultural backwardness of the formerly oppressed peoples.” Accomplishing this would require the elimination of two malignancies inherited from the old regime: Great Power chauvinism and local nationalism. Although the congress spent most of its time on the Great Power nationalism of dominant nations such as the Great Russians, Iaroslavskii and Pospelov foreshadowed that “it would later transpire that the main danger in an array of the national republics and regions was local bourgeois nationalism, which would sell out to the imperialists and prepare for a foreign intervention with the goal of dividing the USSR up among the bourgeois states.”

According to Iaroslavskii and Pospelov, these concerns over the national question led to the formation of a federal union of constituent republics in 1922—the USSR. They also promoted further debate at the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923, where Stalin reiterated the importance of supporting non-Russian cultural and economic development and rebuffed both Great Russian chauvinism and local nationalism. Local nationalists bore the brunt of this attack, particularly Georgian nationalists such as P. G. Mdvani, who “were behaving like outright dominant-nation chauvinists towards other nationalities” in their regions. Trotsky and his supporters Radek and Kh. G. Rakovsky supported the Georgian nationalists in their struggle, as did Bukharin and the Ukrainian N. A. Skrypnik. Iaroslavskii and Pospelov added editorially at this juncture that the Trotskyites’ participation in the debate betrayed their ambition to assemble a large anti-party coalition.

Shortly after the defeat of the local nationalists at the Twelfth Party Congress, another nationalist scandal was exposed in Tatarstan. Its leaders, M. Kh. Sultan-Galiev and other local nationalists, had worked their way into the party’s ranks at the behest of foreign
imperialists, who promised to support their goal of Tatar independence in exchange for assistance in dismembering the USSR. And while this example of nationalist deviation was defeated, other bourgeois nationalists in the party were held to continue to work alongside the Trotskyites and the supporters of Bukharin and Zinov’ev in order to undermine the party line.

This conspiracy against the central party reappeared in Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s narrative in November 1929, in the wake of Bukharin’s expulsion from the Politburo and his confession of rightist errors along with A. I. Rykov, M. P. Tomsky and others. According to the text, the rightists’ public capitulation was an act designed to mask their decision to set up an underground organization to continue their pro-kulak struggle in league with bourgeois nationalists from Ukraine, Belorussia and Central Asia. They apparently concluded an agreement with fascist espionage agencies abroad in order to obtain additional support28 and opened talks with the Trotskyites and Zinov’evites in a bid to form an all-encompassing left-right conspiracy.

Evidence of this rightist alliance with bourgeois nationalists was uncovered in Ukraine in 1930 after the exposure of the “Union for the Liberation of the Ukraine,” a group that Iaroslavskii and Pospelov described as acting on behalf of Polish and German intelligence. The threat was significant enough for Stalin to again include a warning about bourgeois nationalists in a speech at the conclusion of the First Five-Year Plan in which he identified defeated opposition groups that could be expected to intensify their wrecking activities as the USSR reached its goals of constructing a socialist society.

According to Iaroslavskii and Pospelov, Stalin returned to this threat in a speech to the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934. There, he noted that although a series of major nationalist deviations had been neutralized, the threat of more conspiracies remained, due

28 Here, Iaroslavskii and Pospelov appear to have become a bit carried away with their conspiratorial narrative, as the most obvious fascist power abroad—Nazi Germany—would only take shape in 1933.
to both the still-incomplete nature of the Soviet economic transformation and ongoing problems in the republican political leadership. Although the party had ostensibly been struggling on two fronts against nationalism since 1920—against both Great Power chauvinism and local nationalism—the leaders of republics such as Ukraine and Belorussia had apparently focused on the former at the expense of the latter. As a result, Stalin said, the neglected issue of local nationalism had metastasized into a crisis of epic proportions.

In Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s final chapter, their narrative of a major conspiracy of leftist and rightist forces in league with foreign fascists and republican bourgeois nationalists intensified into a discussion of the imminent threat that these forces posed to Soviet Union. Bourgeois nationalists “of every stripe and republic of the USSR” were implicated in the most heinous of crimes, particularly in Belorussia, Ukraine, Karelia, the republics of Central Asia, Tatarstan and the Caucasus. This struggle climaxed after Stalin’s announcement at the February-March 1937 Central Committee Plenum that party organizations “were rife with double-dealers, Trotskyites, Bukharinites and bourgeois nationalists” working together in a massive left-right plot. A crisis that stemmed from Soviet officials’ lack of political vigilance during socialist construction, its liquidation by party authorities in 1938 dashed the hopes of German, Polish and Japanese intelligence for a domestic fifth column during the next war.

Although obsessed with counterrevolution, the chapter also waxed triumphant about the achievements of Soviet nationality policy in a subsection dedicated to the subject. This complemented mention in the previous chapter about the spread of native-language education in the republics with new detail on the growing cultural sophistication of the population. “Ten-day festivals,” Iaroslavskii and Pospelov reported breathlessly, “have taken place in Moscow devoted to Ukrainian, Georgian, Uzbek and Azeri national art, showcasing the cultural growth among the peoples of the USSR under the slogan national in form, socialist in content.” These events, and the delegations of republican leaders who
were fêted in well-publicized Kremlin receptions between 1935 and 1937, provided explicit examples of the USSR’s internationalist Friendship of the Peoples ethic and an implicit counterpoint to the text’s discussion of ongoing bourgeois nationalist conspiracies. Stalin was quoted as announcing at a meeting of Tadzhik and Turkmen collective farmers in 1935 that “the Friendship of the Peoples of the USSR is a major, serious victory. This is because as long as this friendship lasts, our country’s peoples will be free and invincible. No one can frighten us, whether internal or external enemies, while this friendship remains alive and well.” Iaroslavskii and Pospelov continued:

As a result of the implementation of the Lenin-Stalin nationality policy, the peoples of the USSR have ceased to be backward, their economy has improved, their culture has developed and their national cadres have grown . . . . The Lenin-Stalin nationality policy has rallied all of the USSR’s peoples around the Party’s banner and shown the working people of the world a model way in which to correctly resolve the national question.

Tracing the society’s history of interethnic contention and strife to the role of private property and capital in dividing communities against one-another, they noted that the revolution and socialist construction had laid the foundation for “the indestructible moral and political unity of the Soviet peoples.”

The accomplishments of Soviet nationality policy were also discussed in another section of the chapter on the 1936 Stalin Constitution, which was described as providing legal guarantees and protections for the previously oppressed nations of the USSR. Insodoing, Iaroslavskii and Pospelov averred, “the Stalin Constitution demonstrates that only internationalism and the brotherhood of the peoples can lead people to peace. The Stalin Constitution provides proof of the superiority of Soviet democracy over the democracy of the bourgeois states, refutes all the fascists’ lies and falsehoods and their racist, nationalistic theories, and indicts their struggle against the vestiges of democracy in the capitalist countries.”
Iaroslavskii and Pospelov completed the book with a conclusion in which they reiterated that bourgeois nationalists had entered into a macabre left-right conspiracy with other domestic and foreign enemies after their early defeats during the revolution and civil war. Their resistance intensified as the USSR built a socialist society and provided for the liberation of the country’s formerly oppressed nations. And their elimination at the hands of the party and NKVD in 1938 saved the society from a return to colonial enslavement and ensured the further advance of both socialist construction and the Friendship of the Peoples.

**Stalin as Editor**

Stalin set aside time to proofread Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s *Short Course* galleys in a systematic way in late May 1938, probably expecting the task to be relatively straightforward. Instead, what he found left him deeply frustrated. Cursing that “no ‘collective farm’ will ever be able to get this right,” the general secretary sat down and rewrote much of the book himself over the course of several weeks between late May and early August.29 The materials that survive from this time characterize Stalin as a demanding editor who was critical of historical writing that focused on minutia at the expense of the big picture.30 He also had little patience for florid, metaphorical language,

29 RGASPI, f. 89, op. 8, d. 807, l. 3. Archival evidence reveals that Stalin worked alone on Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s manuscript with the assistance of only a small pool of typists. The fact that Stalin’s office appointment book reveals that he received very few visitors in mid-May, mid-June, and early July suggests that it was during this time that he retired to his dacha to focus on the textbook. See *Na prieme u Stalina: Tetradi (zhurnalny) zapisei lits, priniatykh I. V. Stalinym (1924-1953 gg.)* (Moscow: Novyi khranograf, 2008), 236-238.

30 This analysis aggregates together at least three rounds of Stalin’s editing from the summer of 1938, comprising a total of several thousand pages of handwritten marginalia, typescript and publisher’s galleys. Much of this material is held to the present day at the former Central Party Archive in Moscow. For Stalin’s first round, composed of the last chapters of the galleys to Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s third version, unbound pages from the galleys of their fourth version, and Stalin’s own typescript and hand-written pages and interpolations, see RGASPI, f. 558, op. 3, d. 77; op. 11, d. 1209, ll. 1-147; d. 1210, ll. 148-328; d. 1211, ll. 329-392. For Stalin’s second round, consisting of only Chapter 4 in typescript with handwritten editing and interpolations, see d. 1213, ll. 160-237. A complete copy of Stalin’s third round of revisions—a typescript sent to members of his inner circle with additional marginalia added between August 16 and
hyperbole and other literary devices like foreshadowing. The historian I. I. Mints described the experience of working with Stalin in 1935 on a book about the civil war in terms that can inform Stalin’s revisions to the *Short Course* three years later:

Stalin was pedantically interested in formal exactitude. He replaced “Piter” in one place with “Petrograd,” “February in the Countryside” as a chapter title (he thought that suggested a landscape) with “The February Bourgeois-Democratic Revolution,” [and] “Land” as a chapter title (a “modernism,” he called it) with “The Mounting Agrarian Movement.” Grandiloquence was mandatory too. “October Revolution” had to be replaced by “The Great Proletarian Revolution.”

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September 9—is at d. 1212, ll. 1-157; d. 1213, ll. 238-314; d. 1214, ll. 315-444; d. 1215, ll. 445-576; d. 1216, ll. 568-670.

Other drafts, including the intermediate copies of several chapters, have proven impossible to locate and appear to have been discarded during the editorial process. Of Stalin’s first round of editing, Chapters 6 and 8-10 are missing. All of his second round is likewise missing, except for work on Chapter 4. Parts of this missing material—including more work on Chapter 4—may remain in the still-classified collections of the Presidential Archive of the Russian Federation.

Although not as consistent as a professional editor, Stalin generally worked to increase the accessibility of the Short Course by cutting wordiness, digressions and distracting details. He also made numerous thematic cuts, replacing much of the stricken material with text that he wrote himself. Nationality policy was particularly affected by this thematic editing.

Stalin began work on Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s narrative by stripping it of some of its detail on the heavy burden of oppression borne by the non-Russian nationalities before 1917, even cutting his own words about their “inhuman and barbaric treatment.”32 He also deleted virtually all mention of early Bolshevik activism in the Caucasus, undermining the prestige that Iaroslavskii and Pospelov (and L. P. Beriia before them) had cultivated for this regional organization and the general secretary’s own early tenure in the revolutionary underground.33 True, Stalin retained some material in the text’s treatment of unrest in 1905, but even here he reduced the level of detail afforded the non-Russian peoples and removed all discussion of grassroots bravery and valor, diminishing the initiative, agency and heroism that was displayed on the mass level.

Even more striking were Stalin’s revisions to the narrative’s treatment of the 1913 August Bloc, where Iaroslavskii and Pospelov had dedicated a whole subsection to debates over the national question. Here, Stalin reduced several pages of commentary to a single paragraph that essentialized the Menshevik position on cultural autonomy, deleted all mention of Luxemburg and the Bund and summarized the Bolshevik position un informatively as a “Marxist” one. While the general secretary retained mention of his

32 This editing seems related to Stalin’s dislike for the nineteenth-century tendency to single imperial Russia out as a uniquely reactionary and oppressive power. See I. Stalin, “O stat’e Engel’sa ‘Vneshniaia politika russkogo tsarizma,’” Bol’shevik 9 (1941): 3-4. He originally wrote this article as a letter to his Politburo colleagues on July 19, 1934—see RGASPI, f. 77, op. 1, d. 906, ll. 42-43.
33 L. P. Beriia, K voprosu ob istorii bol’shevistskikh organizatsii v Zakavkaz’e (Moscow: Partizdat, 1935).
1913 article on the national question, he cut a flattering quotation by Lenin on its importance, reducing the citation to little more than a line in a curriculum vitae.

Stalin removed all discussion of the national question from the *Short Course*’s treatment of the First World War as well, striking discussion of unrest among the non-Russian peoples in general and the 1916 Kazakh revolt in particular. Similarly cut was mention of the national question in the treatment of Lenin’s *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, as well as Lenin’s differences on the matter with Bukharin, Piatakov and Radek.

After the February 1917 Revolution, Stalin excised Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s observation that the Provisional Government had preserved the tsar’s oppressive policies in regard to the non-Russian peoples. That said, Stalin preserved the text’s discussion of the Bolshevik position on the national question at the Seventh Party Congress, however, where Stalin retained mention of the conference report he had authored on Lenin’s position. He even added a redundant quotation from the conference’s resolutions that repeated the position already outlined in the text. Perhaps most opportunistically, he removed from this discussion all detail surrounding Piatakov and Bukharin’s protest against Lenin’s position on the national question, indicating that they had opposed the right of self-determination but declining to outline the substance of their disagreement.

When it came time for Stalin to revise Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s summary of the key factors behind the October 1917 revolution, he predictably deemphasized the role of the national question. Striking their lengthy paragraph on the subject quoted above, he rewrote the text in such a way as to mention the non-Russian peoples’ role in 1917 only parenthetically, including them in a list of the various constituencies that the Bolsheviks had successfully rallied to the revolutionary cause. The “Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia” was similarly lumped together in an inventory of other social reforms enacted by the new Bolshevik regime. This editing transformed the subsequent loss of
Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic provinces from a national issue into a purely territorial one.

In Stalin’s editing of Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s civil war narrative, he reduced to a minimum all detail concerning non-Russian alliances with foreign imperialists and the domestic bourgeoisie and landowners. All mention was also erased of the “petty bourgeois” former members of non-Russian leftist parties, who undermined the party consensus during the those years. And while Stalin retained mention of the debate over national self-determination at the Eighth Party Congress, he deleted the extended justification for Lenin’s position and its relevance for the Comintern and the struggle with world imperialism. He likewise struck out the determination that the defense of this principle had helped determine the outcome of the civil war. This editing effectively removed the national question from the 1918-1920 narrative, which Stalin offset with token mention of the Bolshevik defeat of “bourgeois nationalists” such as Mussavatists, Georgian Mensheviks and Armenian Dashnaks.

Stalin took the nationality question during the early 1920s more seriously and retained Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s warnings about the bourgeois nationalist threat, both on the periphery and within the party itself. He also preserved their discussion of his report at the Tenth Party Congress. That said, his editing here reveals two intriguing moments: first, he attempted to distinguish between the concept of Great Power chauvinism and the phenomenon of Russian chauvinism, which Iaroslavskii and Pospelov had tended to conflate. This transformed the issue of Great Power chauvinism from a pointed critique of the Russian people into a more general indictment that could be leveled at non-Russian “bourgeois nationalists” like Mdvani as well. Second, Stalin cut Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s note about how local nationalism would eventually pose a more serious threat to the USSR than Great Power chauvinism, inasmuch as he differed with them on the
scale of the bourgeois nationalist menace and disliked their penchant for literary foreshadowing. Stalin then strengthened the text’s connection of Soviet nationality policy to the successful formation of USSR—“a single union of Soviet states”—in a series of edits that downplayed the country’s federal structure.

It bears mentioning at this point that the broad contours of Stalin’s editing of the Short Course reveal the general secretary to have taken a very dim view of Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s claustrophobic, hysterical account of the anti-party conspiracies from both the left and the right during these years—a line that he himself had encouraged them to interpolate into the text after the Third Moscow Trial just months before. Finding the omnipresent conspiracy paradigm to be either inexpedient or unpersuasive, Stalin now cut vast stretches of text from the manuscript (over 10,000 words from the final four chapters alone) in order to reduce the intensity and immediacy of the threat. Not only did the general secretary strike out much of the detail and discussion devoted to the crises in agriculture, industry and party life, but he also blurred the attribution of these crises to a well-organized movement at home or hostile enemies abroad. Stalin also cut discussion of the Comintern and class struggle in places like Germany and Spain, stifling the contention that there was a worldwide assault underway against socialism. What Iaroslavskii and Pospelov had emplotted as a terrifying exposé of pervasive wrecking, foreign-sponsored terrorism and insurrection was disassembled by Stalin into a much less threatening story of challenges encountered along the path to socialism.35

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34 This is clear from his subsequent revisions to the Sultan-Galiev scandal, where he added mention of more conspirators—F. G. Khodzhaev and other Uzbek nationalists—but deleted allegations that the group had penetrated the party’s ranks at the request of foreign imperialist powers.

This meant that almost all discussion of bourgeois nationalist involvement in the conspiracies exposed during the Great Terror disappeared as Stalin revised the text—everything from their rightist links to Bukharin in 1929 to their plotting with the Trotskyite and Zinov’evite left in 1937-1938. True, abstract mention of bourgeois nationalism was retained in several places, such as in Stalin’s warnings to the Seventeenth Party Congress. But the end result was not only an overall reduction in attention cast to the issue, but a transformation of what remained from a concrete, imminent threat to a more remote, theoretical menace. This pattern continued through the Short Course’s final chapter, where Stalin again deleted all mention of the bourgeois nationalist threat.
More curiously, Stalin also attacked the more positive dimensions of nationality policy during this editorial process. In particular, he deleted the entire subsection that Iaroslavskii and Pospelov dedicated to the Friendship of the Peoples in Chapter Twelve, as well as all of their rhapsodic language about the accomplishments of nationality policy. Stalin even cut the quotation from his own speech to the Tadzhik and Turkmen collective farmers about the USSR’s resolution of the national question, as well as everything but the technical dimensions of national emancipation from the text’s discussion of the Stalin Constitution.

In the book’s conclusion, Stalin again reduced Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s discussion of bourgeois nationalism to a series of passing parenthetical comments and dropped all mention of the threat that this specter posed to the accomplishments of Soviet nationality policy. In its place, he offered a much more vague, generalized “if-then” statement about the necessity of the national purges:

If we had not defeated the nationalist deviators of all shades and colors, we could not have educated the people in the spirit of internationalism, we could not have safeguarded the banner of the great Friendship of the Peoples of the USSR and we could not have built up the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Little more than a poorly-formulated afterthought, this statement substituted ahistorical platitudes for the more triumphalist sloganeering in circulation in Soviet mass culture since the early-to-mid 1930s.

Stalin’s Solution to the Nationalities Issue

What, then, was the logic behind Stalin’s solution to the nationalities issue? What led him to silence an official line on nationality policy that had long alternated between the celebration of the Friendship of the Peoples and condemnation of bourgeois nationalism?

Perhaps most easily understood is the general secretary’s quashing of commentary on bourgeois nationalism. As noted above, between March and May 1938, Stalin reversed
himself on the subject of the omnipresent left-right conspiracy in Soviet society and removed vast amounts of material from the text that he had requested Iaroslavskii and Pospelov to provide in the wake of the Third Moscow Trial. During this editing process, he deleted approximately the same proportion of commentary on bourgeois nationalists as he did on left and right opposition, suggesting that he no longer believed that party history should be emplotted according to the threat posed by either Trotsky and Bukharin or Skrypnik.

Secondary patterns in Stalin’s editorial process appear to account for other cuts to the national narrative. As I have argued elsewhere, Stalin appears to have wanted to structure the Short Course around an institutional history of the party rather than a heroic one—a decision predicated both on the Great Terror’s destruction of the leading lights of the party and Stalin’s corresponding new preference for historical materialism and Marxist laws of development.36 For this reason, he not only erased dozens of protagonists and malefactors from the annals of party history, but he reined in his own personality cult in order to endow the central party apparatus with a greater sense of historical agency and initiative. Similarly stricken from the record was attention paid to local and regional party organizations that might have distracted the Short Course’s readership from the core of this centralized political system. Both of these editorial paradigms explain the cutting of a large amount of commentary on non-Russian revolutionary movements, Stalin’s service in the Caucasian underground and the trials and tribulations of republican party organizations in the years after 1917.

Harder to explain is Stalin’s purge of celebratory commentary on Soviet nationality policy, especially the Friendship of the Peoples. After all, neither the national question nor its sloganeering evoked the claustrophobia of the Terror, nor did it threaten to eclipse the institutional primacy of the central party apparatus. Was it that nationality policy was

36 Brandenberger, Propaganda State in Crisis, 205-206.
judged to be incompatible with the Stalin Constitution? Peter Blitstein has argued persuasively in the past that certain dimensions of nationality policy in the USSR were called into question by the late 1936 constitution’s guarantees of universal equality and elimination of special categories of citizenship. An intriguing idea, it does not appear to have influenced the *Short Course* narrative: neither Iaroslavskii nor Pospelov appeared aware of any incompatibility between 1937-1938 and Stalin, Stetskii and A. A. Zhdanov missed multiple opportunities to correct an error of this sort before Stalin began editing during the summer of 1938. Was the decline of the role of nationality policy in the *Short Course* connected to the “russification of the RSFSR” or the rise of official russocentrism? Again, probably not: the *Short Course* never contained enough russocentric patriotic rhetoric to suggest a substitution of one mobilizational line for the other, whether in Iaroslavskii and Pospelov’s original text or any of Stalin’s hundreds of interpolations.

What else might explain the rapid decline of public discussion of Soviet nationality policy? Perhaps Stalin found it difficult in the wake of the Terror’s near total destruction of the republican party organizations to imagine how propagandists might continue to celebrate the Friendship of the Peoples. The cultural fanfare and stage-managed conferences of republican elites during the mid-1930s had, after all, depended on non-Russian celebrities like F. G. Khodzhaev whose ranks had just been decimated. I have argued elsewhere that the purge of the Soviet pantheon of heroes dealt such a devastating

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37 On the Stalin Constitution, see Blitsein, “Stalin’s Nations,” 11-12, 189-191.
38 On the russification of the RSFSR, see Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 403-414; on the rise of official russocentrism, see Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism*.
39 I have argued elsewhere that in 1938, Stalin viewed official russocentrism as a populist mobilizational slogan appropriate for use within society on the mass level. He probably declined to include it within textbooks on party history because these materials were aimed at an educated audience that could be expected to master more complex propaganda oriented around orthodox Marxist principles. This bifurcation of Soviet propaganda was abandoned in 1941 in favor of a more integrated, hybridized approach. See Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 210; Brandenberger, “Ideologicheskie istoki sovetskogo patriotizma,” ms. 2012.
40 On the purges in the republican parties, see Simon, *Nationalismus und Nationalitätenpolitik in der Sowjetunion* 180-194.
blow to party propaganda that it forced the regime into a second, panicky search for a usable past, and this could well explain the dramatic turn away from the Friendship of the Peoples in 1938.\footnote{Brandenberger, \textit{Propaganda State in Crisis}, chaps. 10-11.}

Equally likely is that the Terror left Stalin confused over the historical legacy of Soviet nationality policy. There was, after all, more than enough chaos in the republics to frustrate the general secretary even after he grew tired of the most outrageous, hysterical dimensions of the bourgeois nationalist left-right conspiracy. Perhaps the seemingly never-ending flow of bad news about the republican parties that came across Stalin’s desk between 1937-1938 eclipsed the more positive dimensions of nationality policy, leaving him wondering whether there was anything left to celebrate.\footnote{In a personal communication, Serhy Yekelchyk counters that perhaps Stalin had simply come to believe that the national question had been resolved and no longer required specific treatment in the \textit{Short Course}. Although an interesting hypothesis, it is hard to historicize within the summer months of 1938. The explanations advanced here, by contrast, not only fit contingently into the Terror period, but can accommodate Stalin’s dramatic change of heart regarding the threat of omnipresent conspiracy between March and May of that year. Personal communication with Serhy Yekelchyk, October 3, 2012.} This appears to have been the case with the Comintern as well, which was similarly stricken from the party’s historical record at the same time.\footnote{The decision to excise the Comintern from party history was taken while the investigation of its former leadership (and people like Knorin) was still underway. The fact that the organization nevertheless escaped explicit criticism or condemnation in the \textit{Short Course} suggests that Stalin was either unsure of how to treat it in historical perspective or had written the body off entirely. It was also during the summer of 1938 that Stalin decided to try the Comintern leadership in camera rather than organize a fourth major show trial. See B. A. Starkov, “The Trial That Was Not Held,” \textit{Europe-Asia Studies} 46:8 (1994): 1297-1315.}

Ultimately, perhaps the best way of explaining Stalin’s solution to the nationalities issue is to conclude that all of these factors—the imperative of new mobilizational propaganda, the desire to elevate the central party apparatus and the dismay over the chaos in the republics—combined together in 1938 to undermine the priority and visibility of nationality policy in the USSR. But rather than denouncing or renouncing it, Stalin instead decided to merely condemn the national question to obscurity by effectively excising it from the annals of party history.