Stalin on Stamps: Design, Propaganda, Politics
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Joseph Stalin, the dictator of the Soviet Union from 1929 to 1953, was surrounded by a cult of personality that dominated all areas of Soviet public life. His image appeared on a number of Soviet stamps issued between 1934 and 1955. Very little substantive research has been published on Stalin and Stalinist propaganda on stamps. In this article, I will examine these stamps in the context of contemporaneous political circumstances and analyze their design. In addition, I will define their importance for the purposes of domestic and international propaganda.

Besides the Soviet Union, many stamps dedicated to Stalin were issued by communist countries after World War II. Using the same approach, I will discuss their design, political meaning, and propaganda value.

Our understanding of Stalin changed dramatically over the last 15 years. This change has been brought about by the wealth of new archival material and extensive research. It used to be commonplace to think of Stalin as an unremarkable, two-dimensional figure, who reached unprecedented power almost by accident. This concept has been replaced by another one, that of a complex, shrewd, industrious politician, a man with many talents and criminal mind.

Stalin was born Iosif Dzhugashvili on December 21, 1879, in a small Georgian town of Gori. By 1899, he became a faithful follower of Lenin's version of Marxism and began his activity as underground radical activist, organizing boycotts, arsons, extortions, strikes, robberies, as well as printing and distributing Marxist literature. In 1917, Stalin supported the Bolshevik coup and became a member of the first Soviet cabinet. In 1922, Lenin appointed him Secretary General of the party. When Lenin died in January 1924, he left a "Political Will," in which he strongly advised the Party to remove Stalin from power. The Will was kept secret, Lenin's recommendation was ignored, and Stalin continued his political ascent.

In 1929, Stalin turned 50. By that date, he had defeated his enemies and rivals within the Party, and the official newspaper "Pravda" in its feature editorial proclaimed a new
official slogan: "Stalin is the Lenin of today." Since Lenin had been deified even before his death, this formula did the same for Stalin.

However, not everybody was happy about Stalin's leadership, and during the XVII Congress of the Bolshevik party in January 1934, Stalin received fewer votes for his candidacy as a member of Central Committee than his closest party comrade and rival Kirov who received the most. The results of the elections had to be rigged to give Stalin enough votes. According to most historians, this was the first step in establishing his dictatorship.

These were the circumstances when the first Soviet stamp depicting Stalin appeared as the high value of the set "Ten years without Lenin." This happened in November 1934, nine months after the actual commemorative date.

![Figure 1. A – first Soviet stamp with Stalin (1934); B – an early "double profile" Lenin-Stalin (Pravda, July 30, 1933).](image)

The designers of the stamp chose a rather rare artistic device of "double profile" to represent the formula "Stalin is the Lenin of today" (Figure 1A).\textsuperscript{2, 3} The most difficult problem was the combination of a live person – Stalin – with the deceased Lenin, and here it has been done quite aptly. Stalin looks fully alive, while Lenin is depicted as a bust in marble. Apparently, the only earlier design representing such a double profile had been published in "Pravda" in 1933, but in that case Lenin looked rather "ghostly" (Figure 1B). Over the next few years, the double profile "Lenin-Stalin" became the staple of Soviet propaganda, and one could argue that its execution on the stamp of 1934 became exemplary for other artists.
The incorporation of Stalin in the set dedicated to Lenin reflected his monopoly of power. This monopoly was further strengthened by the next move by Stalin: the assassination of Kirov, his only remaining rival in the party, and the beginning of an all-out campaign of terror. As historic documents, propaganda stamps can not only reflect past events, but also serve as indications of the future. This is an important point discussed by Dr. Child in respect of stamps of Argentina, but it has not been explored in case of Soviet stamps.

Visual elements of the Stalin stamp of 1934 presented simple, familiar icons to Soviet people. At the same time, despite the limitations of Cyrillic alphabet, the symbolism of the stamp was clear to international audience. The amount of writing was kept at a minimum, and the profiles of Lenin and Stalin were already well known throughout the world. In the background, there were people marching with huge banners, and this powerful picture was emphasized by crimson red color with light orange background, creating associations with symbolic fire of the world revolution. The artfully fading background added theatrical quality to the design.

It has been noted by many authors, and particularly by David Scott in his fundamental work on European stamp design, that stamps are often used as propaganda intended for international audiences. The value of the "Lenin-Stalin" stamp was 30 kop., and it could have been used as postage on international correspondence, as it paid the rates for foreign airmail postcards and for letters to Central Europe. However, only 50,000 copies were issued, the lowest print run for Soviet commemoratives of that period, and copies on covers are rare. Being the key value of the set, the stamp drew attention of international philatelic markets.

As far as its design and propaganda value are concerned, the first Stalin stamp of 1934 seems much more successful than early stamps showing other dictators of the era. For instance, Hitler first appeared on stamps which were part of his birthday souvenir sheet of 1937 (Figure 2). The impact of this sheet was limited to those who were already under the spell of Hitler's personality: contrary to other propaganda stamps of the Third Reich, it did not include any Nazi symbols. The motto said: "He who wants to save his people must think heroically." Although today it sounds rather general, at the time of the issue it served a very specific purpose of justification of the annexation of Austria. From
1937 to 1944, Hitler's birthday was commemorated yearly by issuing semi-postal stamps. Besides, he was depicted on several other stamps, including the main definitive set of 1941-1944.\textsuperscript{6} Ironically, the more desperate was the Germany's situation in the war, the more portentous stamps were issued, going from plain portraits in 1937 to Hitler’s likeness surrounded by a full set of Nazi symbols in 1944. The excessive use of the dictator's image on stamps while the country was losing the war seems to be a major failure of Nazi propaganda machine and a sign of Hitler's disconnect with reality.

![First appearance of Hitler on stamps (1937).](image)

Stalin's attitude towards his own cult of personality was much more shrewd and farsighted. From time to time he hypocritically protested the overuse of his name,\textsuperscript{7} yet all kinds of institutions, thousands of streets, towns, cities, and even the highest mountain in the USSR were named after the Great Leader, and it was hard to find a place without a monument to Stalin. Many talented artists worked on sculptures, paintings and posters, which often included an oversized figure of Stalin. At the same time, his image appeared on a limited number of Soviet stamps. It is unclear how the decisions to issue particular Soviet stamps were made at that time,\textsuperscript{8} but there is evidence that at least in some cases it occurred at the highest level of power. Those responsible for the design of Soviet stamps always realized that propaganda on stamps could reach larger international audience than probably any other media.

From the very beginning, Soviet government wanted to distance itself from the image of monarchic Imperial Russia, and Soviet definitives portrayed generic workers, peasants,
soldiers, as well as deceased Lenin. This is probably one of the reasons why Stalin never appeared on Soviet definitive stamps. Another reason was that, paradoxically enough, from 1934 and up to the beginning of the war, Stalin was not the head of the USSR in any official capacity, but just one of the technically equal secretaries of the Central committee (first they were four of them, then three, then five, and so on). Thus, there was no formal justification to put Stalin on definitive stamps. At the same time, the nominal head of the Soviet Union president Kalinin appeared on stamps on the occasion of his 60th birthday.

Of course, in the ideologically charged atmosphere of the 1930s, some commemorative stamps, which were not dedicated to Stalin personally, incorporated his omnipresent image. One such instance was the 80 kop. stamp from the set "Twenty years of the Red Army" of 1938 (Figure 3). The stamp reproduced the painting “Stalin greets the First Cavalry Army” by M. Avilov and thus illustrated a major falsification of the history of the Red Army, according to which it was created by Stalin, while in fact it was founded by Trotsky. The set was issued after the execution of two thirds of the top officers of the Red Army during the Great Terror, so anyone who knew the true history was either dead or afraid to say a word.

Figure 3. Twenty years of the Red Army (1938). "Stalin greets the First Cavalry Army."
The third pre-war stamp that indirectly featured Stalin was included in the set “All-Union Agricultural Exhibition” (1940; Figure 4A). The monument to Stalin by S. D. Merkurov, one of the largest of its kind at 25 m, stood in front of one of the pavilions. It is interesting to compare the stamp intended for both domestic and international propaganda with the postcards showing the same subject (Figure 4B). Postcards circulated mostly within the country, and therefore were directed at domestic audience. On the stamp, the monument is shifted aside, and the pavilion, symbolizing Soviet economic success, is placed at the center of the composition. On the postcard, on the contrary, the monument is exactly at the center – a visual cue to ascribe the economic success to the wise leadership of one man.10

In addition to stamps whose design had easily recognizable images of Stalin, he is inconspicuously present on many more issues. These could be defined as "cryptic appearances." They played only marginal role in propaganda, but rather reflected the realities of everyday life in the Soviet Union. One example of such a "cryptic appearance" was a 1938 stamp from the set dedicated to the 20th anniversary of Komsomol. Young members of the Komsomol held books with the names of Lenin and Stalin on their covers as one can see only with proper magnification. But we can safely

Figure 4. Stalin monument at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition on stamp (A; 1940) and on the postcard published in 1940 in Leningrad (B).
assume that Soviet people did not need a magnifying glass to find out what books Soviet youths were supposed to read. Such "cryptic appearances" became especially common after the war.

A few days after the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Stalin became the military dictator. The country was in a critical situation, and beginning from July all planned stamp issues were evidently cancelled. Only two more stamps were produced in 1941. The first – "Be a Hero!" – appealed to the most basic national values, depicting a mother sending her son to the battle. The second showed a group of volunteers and a long slogan: "In response to the appeal of the great leader of the peoples comrade Stalin, the sons of Soviet motherland join volunteer militia." During the initial period of the war, when the Red Army suffered disastrous defeats, Soviet propaganda clearly avoided the association of Stalin's personal image with the losses. Especially revealing in this respect was the 1942 year set. As compared with sixty stamps in a typical pre-war year, only twenty stamps were issued. Not one of these twenty stamps displayed any signs of official ideology. They showed mostly heroes of the war, battle scenes, and workers of the rear. Even the official symbol of the USSR, sickle and hammer, was displayed on one stamp only. Moreover, one could rarely find Stalin's name, portrait, or profile on any of the numerous propaganda postcards and letter sheets issued between July 1941 and January 1943.

The commander-in-chief appeared on Soviet stamps only when the immediate mortal danger for the Soviet Union had passed. For the first time since the beginning of the war Stalin was depicted on stamps in the set commemorating 25 years of the Bolshevik revolution (Figure 5). The set was issued two months after the actual celebration, in January of 1943.

One of these stamps appealed to the workers of the military industry; another, which paid the most common letter postage, included portraits of Lenin and Stalin, Moscow Kremlin towers as the embodiment of the national unity, and rays shining from behind the Kremlin, symbolizing the bright communist future. By that moment, Soviet victory at Stalingrad had determined the outcome of the war, and Soviet ideology re-focused on building communism: only four stamps in the set of eight were related to the ongoing war; others could be categorized as general communist propaganda.
In 1944, the set "Ten years without Lenin" from 1934 was re-issued with new dates and two new values, one of them being another "Lenin-Stalin" stamp (similar to Figure 1A) in different colors. Now these two stamps were the lowest and the highest values of the issue. The set was probably intended primarily for international philatelic market, because it could have been nicely arranged on an album page and the new top value of 3 rubles was way too high for any standard rate.

In January 1945, the Lenin-Stalin double profile appeared on the stamp depicting a medal awarded to Soviet partisans (Figure 6A). It was the first of several stamps that showed Stalin indirectly on various medals and awards. The original design of this particular medal was commissioned for the award "Twenty five years of Soviet army," which has never been issued, so the design was re-used. This explains why the double profile appeared first on the medal of relatively lesser importance.
After the Partisan medal, Stalin's profile was put on the most common medals awarded to all who fought in the war and on a similar one for those who worked in the rear, both inscribed with the words "Our cause is just, we have won" (Figure 6B). The Victory was achieved at the cost of about 27 millions lives and enormous heroism and suffering of Soviet people, but it has been appropriated by a single man. We now know that Stalin was not shown on any of a dozen of essays of various medals, including the Victory medal, submitted by major Soviet artists. These projects depicted foot soldiers, pilots, tank men, nurses, and other rank and file heroes of the war. It was definitely Stalin's personal decision to put his profile on the medals instead.

Stalin as the sole representative figure of Soviet Victory was probably the most persistent myth created by Soviet propaganda. After the war, it was readily accepted by other Stalinist regimes and communist parties elsewhere. To some extent, it was propagated through philately.

In the next few years Stalin appeared on other medals, which were also depicted on stamps. Moreover, designers of Soviet stamps began portraying Stalin as if cast in bronze even when the images were not related to any existing awards. Thus, almost identical stamps commemorating anniversaries of the revolution in 1951 and 1952 both imitated sculpted bas-reliefs of Stalin and Lenin (Figure 6C). These designs conveyed a sense of lasting, if not eternal, power. It is noteworthy that Lenin, the founder of Soviet state, never appeared on stamps without Stalin in such a visual context. Lenin was usually depicted as a kind and caring person, civilian intellectual rather than a military commander – "the most humane of human beings" (Vladimir Mayakovsky).

As noted by many historians and contemporaries, after the war, ideological pressure in general and Stalin's cult of personality in particular increased substantially. Nevertheless, it seems that Stalin kept tight control over the use of his images. One striking example is his absence from stamps dedicated to the 30th anniversary of October revolution. A recently published catalog reproduces essays of these stamps with Stalin portrayed on each of them (Figure 7). The actually issued set had no Stalin. The most probable reason for his absence was the catastrophic famine in the USSR, which killed up to 1.5 mln. people in 1946-1947 and was caused to a large extent by government policies, in particular massive expropriation and export of grain. Naturally, Stalin did not want to
be associated with this tragedy. Instead, some stamps of the set displayed a slogan "USSR is the country of advanced agriculture" and showed a field with abundant harvest. It has to be stressed that the decision to change the design could only have been made by Stalin personally; nobody else would have dared to do it. This strongly suggests that at least in some cases Stalin was personally involved in the decisions concerning stamp design.

Another approach of Soviet stamp designers to create a visual concept of Stalin's leadership and popularity was a display of a large group of demonstrators carrying Stalin's portraits. Such stamps were issued in July 1946 and June 1947 to commemorate a parade of physical culture and Labor Day, correspondingly (Fig. 8). On both issues, the artists succeeded in conveying the feeling of youth, energy, dynamism and popular admiration. This composition seems to be unique for Soviet propaganda: no other totalitarian regime of the era came up with a similar idea. It only appeared 20 years later, in 1966, on a stamp of People's Republic of China (PRC) glorifying Mao Tse-tung, and his portrait was also carried by the activists of physical culture.

Figure 7. Unissued essays "30 years of October revolution" (left) and issued stamps (1947).
In December of 1949, Stalin officially turned 70. To celebrate his birthday, Soviet postal authorities issued a well-known souvenir sheet of four stamps (Figure 9). This is, strictly speaking, the only Soviet issue dedicated to Stalin personally. The first stamp showed a hut in Gori, Georgia, in which Stalin was born to a family of poor cobbler. The second stamp reproduced a drawing by Evgeny Kibrik “Lenin is arriving to Smolnyi during the night of October 24.” The Bolshevik coup occurred on October 25, 1917, and the headquarters of the uprising were located in Smolnyi monastery in Petrograd. The picture was fictional, since neither Stalin, nor Lenin was present at the headquarters on the day of the uprising. This falsification was exploited by Stalinist propaganda in other countries as well, and its goal was to establish the direct continuity of Marxist leadership from Lenin to Stalin at the exclusion of everybody else. The third stamp was based on a photograph of Stalin visiting gravely ill Lenin, and it had to emphasize their closeness. Finally, the fourth stamp showed Stalin in his office in full military uniform as the victorious generalissimos (portrait by B. Karpov).

The design of the souvenir sheet was supposed to induce warm feeling of personal loyalty to the Great Leader. It presented a brief narrative of Stalin's life and, unlike most Soviet stamps of the period, it was lacking any symbols of Soviet state – either hammer and sickle, a star, or Kremlin towers. By that time, Stalin's image itself acquired strong symbolic functions: the follower of Lenin and the leader of world Marxist movement; the victor in WWII; and the national symbol of the USSR.
Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania commemorated Stalin's anniversary on stamps as well. Especially interesting was the appearance of Stalin on stamps of Port-Arthur and Darien area of China, which was occupied by the Red Army, but had independent postal administration. Although the People's Republic was proclaimed by Mao Tse-tung on October 1, 1949, Port-Arthur and Darien did not issue any stamps with Mao. Instead, a stamp with double profile of Lenin-Stalin appeared in November to mark the 32d anniversary of Russian revolution, and then a set of two stamps in December commemorated Stalin's birthday in December of the same year. It was a striking manifestation of the pro-Soviet politics.14

Yugoslavia has never put Stalin on stamps. By 1949, its dictator Tito already had a run-in with Stalin, and its relations with the USSR were extremely hostile. It is not clear why Poland failed to commemorate Stalin's anniversary, although the dictator did appear on Polish stamps both before and after 1949.
At the end of 1949, Soviet propaganda began the so-called "world peace campaign," which was promoted in part through philately. "The struggle for peace" was carried out as an initiative coming directly from Stalin, and this notion dominated the campaign. No wonder that Stalin was represented on "Peace" stamps either as a portrait on a wall, or as the author of a slogan or a quotation. Thus, on one of these stamps there is a quote from "Stalin’s conversation with the correspondent of newspaper ‘Pravda’” 17 February 1951": “Peace will be preserved and consolidated if the peoples will take the cause of preserving peace into their own hands and defend it to the end.” This rather tautological quote immediately became the staple of the international peace campaign and was endlessly cited in propaganda materials. Other communist countries issued their own "peace campaign" stamps, and some artists proved to be more ingenious than their Soviet colleagues. For example, a pigeon of peace was added to the well-known Stalin's portrait on a Bulgarian stamp (Figure 10).

![Figure 10. Peace campaign stamp issued by Bulgaria in 1949 (A) and the original painting by S. Gerasimov (B; 1939).](image)

From ideological point of view, an important stamp was issued in the USSR in 1950 to commemorate the Labor Day. This was the first image of the "foursome" of communist saints on a stamp. Although this arrangement already appeared on a Soviet poster in 1939, the stamp gave it an international exposure. The composition emphasized
the direct continuity of the world Marxist leadership from Marx through Engels and Lenin to Stalin. Back in 1939, the USSR was the only Marxist state, and its leading role in the movement was self-evident. By 1950, the victorious USSR established communist regimes in a dozen new countries, including the giant China, and some of them had already deviated from Stalin's "general line." At that point, Soviet control should have been enforced by a strong propaganda message personified by Stalin.

The commemoration of certain events on stamps, or, on the contrary, the disregard of certain events of significant ideological importance not only reflects the undercurrents in politics, but in some cases anticipates coming changes. This is particularly true in case of totalitarian regimes. One of the most remarkable examples of this phenomenon was the fact that the Soviet Union did not issue any mourning stamps upon Stalin's death on March 5, 1953. When Lenin died in 1924, mourning stamps were designed, printed and made available throughout the country within five days. When Soviet president Kalinin died in 1946, the mourning stamp was issued just two days later. Nothing of this sort happened after Stalin's death. It can be explained by the fact that Stalin did not appoint his successor, and the struggle for power among the members of politburo began already at his deathbed. Further confusion was reflected in significant decrease in the number of new issues: there were 48 new Soviet stamps in 1952, only 28 in 1953, the year of Stalin's death, and 55 in 1954. Meanwhile, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Poland did issue mourning stamps immediately after Stalin's death, and Hungary even added a souvenir sheet.

An astute political observer could not miss a set of two stamps issued in the USSR in November-December of 1953. The set commemorated 50 years since the founding of the Russian Social-democratic party, a faction of which became the Bolshevik party. Stalin was nowhere to be found on those stamps. His conspicuous absence from such an ideologically important issue forestalled the emerging changes in the official attitude towards Stalin's legacy.
In March 1954, Soviet Union issued a stamp to commemorate one year since Stalin's death (Figure 11A). He was depicted in a military uniform that he wore after 1943, when the shoulder straps were introduced in the Red Army, to emphasize his role in the Victory. The design of monochrome dark brown stamp was rather reserved. The next Soviet set of two stamps with Stalin was issued in December of 1954 to commemorate 75 years since his birth (Figure 11B). Here he was shown in civil clothes at the age of about 40-45. The message could be interpreted as follows: the most important period of Stalin's career was in the 1920s, when he was one of the Bolshevik leaders. There is a striking difference between the designs of these two Soviet issues and the East German stamp commemorating one year since Stalin's death (Figure 11C). Here, three colors and a much more aggrandizing style were used, in line with East German Stalinist political course. At about the same time, the last Soviet stamp with a strong Stalinist ideological message was issued in commemoration of the October revolution (Figure 11D). Here Stalin appeared within the group of the four Marxist saints for the second time. Arguably, at least some members of Soviet political elites who sponsored this issue were still considering Stalin the true follower of the Marx-Lenin line.

In 1956, Khrushchev disclosed the so-called "violation of socialist legality" by Stalin and his regime and started the process of partial de-Stalinization of the USSR. Those members of Soviet politburo who were in open disagreement over the new course were
ousted from the power, and Stalin disappeared from Soviet and Russian stamps for the next 40 years. Most communist countries obligingly followed the new line (with the exception of PRC and Albania), and in 1953-54 Stalin disappeared from their stamps as well. One rarely noticed exception was East Germany, where the Secretary General of the Social-Democratic Party Walter Ulbricht remained an unrepentant Stalinist till his death in 1973. No wonder that GDR was the only country that issued in 1953 a definitive stamp with Stalin's name on it (Figure 12A). This stamp showed Stalinallee, an exemplary socialist urban development project in Berlin. It paid basic domestic letter rate, was re-engraved and reprinted many times and demonetized only in December of 1962. The picture on the stamp shows the side of the street opposite to the monument to Stalin: even for the East German regime it would be too much to put the head of another state on definitive stamps. The design of the Stalinallee stamp has been used by underground anti-communist groups to create propaganda forgeries in which the name of the country was stated as "Undeutsche Undemokratische Republik" and an alternative name of the street after the popular uprising on June 17, 1953, was added beneath the word "Stalinallee" (Figure 12B).

Finally, Stalin appeared on one more GDR stamp commemorating 25 years of Potsdam conference as late as 1970 (Figure 12C), the only such occurrence in European communist countries after 1956.

Figure 11. Last East German stamps with Stalin. A – Stalinallee definitive, B – propaganda forgery based on A; C – Stalin at Potsdam conference, issued in 1970.
With the relaxation of ideological constraints after Stalin's death, people began using stamps with his image to create postal arrangements expressing their political views. For instance, in June 1956 one Mr. Anastassov from Bulgaria combined three stamps to pay correct postage to Turkey and to show his attitude to the late Stalin (Figure 13A). Such an audacity would have been severely punished just a couple of years earlier. However, most postal items of this sort were produced by hard-core Stalinists, who found themselves excluded from the ideological mainstream. For instance, in 1960 a Stalin sympathizer from Leningradskaya oblast' sent an old postcard with monument to Stalin and paid registered postage with an old Stalin and a newer Lenin stamp, emphasizing the continuity of Soviet leadership (Figure B). Because of the monetary reform in the USSR introduced on January 1, 1961, it was the last opportunity to use Stalin stamps for postage. The sender had enough courage to create this composition, but not to sign his name legibly.

![Figure 12. Use of stamps with Stalin's portraits for political expression. A – cover sent from Bulgaria to Turkey; B – domestic Soviet postcard.](image)

Meanwhile, two countries, PRC and Albania, remained the strongholds of Stalinism long after 1956. The timing and meaning of Stalin's images on their stamps were always closely associated with political developments.

In PRC, the first stamp with Stalin was issued in 1949, immediately after the proclamation of the People's Republic. Mao travelled to Moscow to attend Stalin's jubilee
and negotiate a Sino-Soviet treaty. The resulting treaty was commemorated in a set issued almost a year later (Figure 13A). Although other communist dictators were shown on stamps together with Stalin, here the closeness of Stalin and Mao is emphasized by their handshake. Warm personal relationship between the leaders was illustrated once again (posthumously for Stalin) on a stamp commemorating five years of the treaty and based on a painting "The great friendship" by D. Nalbandian (1950) (Figure 13B).

![Figure 13. Stalin and Mao on stamps of PRC in 1950 (A) and in 1955 (B).](image)

Another Chinese set with Stalin was dedicated to the 35th anniversary of Russian revolution (1953; Figure 14A). The first stamp reproduced the well-known painting “Lenin declares Soviet Rule” in which young Stalin stood right behind Lenin. This was a complete fiction, and after 1956 the artist produced a new painting without Stalin. The green stamp shows Stalin and Mao strolling in the Kremlin. The image on the third stamp was based on a mass-produced Soviet poster "Under the leadership of the great Stalin – forward to communism!" The last stamp depicts Stalin's granite statue near the entrance to the Volga-Don canal. At 36 m, it was one of the tallest in the world. The most interesting feature of this set is that out of four stamps only the first one is related to the revolution and shows its leader Lenin. This reflects a major shift in Soviet ideology that was not explicitly spelled out by Soviet propaganda: after the WWII, Stalin gradually replaced Lenin as the main figure in the hierarchy of the greatest communists. The set was issued a full year after the actual anniversary, after Stalin's death, and reiterated the strict adherence to Stalinist ideology. The primacy of Stalin over Lenin was even more evident in another Chinese stamp issued in 1954 (Figure 14B). Here Lenin is shown in
submissive position listening to overbearing Stalin. This sculpture was unveiled in 1949 in Moscow to a great critical acclaim, but the general ideological tendency it manifested was hardly noticed at that time outside the Soviet Union.

Figure 14. Stalin on stamps of PRC in 1953 (A) and 1954 (B).

After 1956, Stalin was often placed on stamps of PRC to express a dissent or even a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Thus, the foursome of Marxist saints appeared on Chinese stamps in 1964 on a minor occasion of the Labor Day (Figure 15A). The relationships between PRC and Soviet Union at that time were rapidly deteriorating. The main points of contention were Mao's thesis denying any possibility of peaceful coexistence with capitalist countries and inevitability of a new world war, his personal animosity towards Khrushchev and some other issues. Soviet communists openly accused the leadership of PRC of deviation from orthodox Marxism-Leninism. As the result, almost all relations were broken, and Chinese authorities used the first convenient occasion to display their faithfulness to the cause of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin.

Figure 15. Use of Stalin's image by PRC (A, 1964) and Albania (B, 1963) as a symbol of dissent with the USSR.
Albania also used Stalin's image on stamps to express its opposition to Soviet politics. Such was the purpose of the stamp commemorating 20 years of the Battle of Stalingrad (Figure 15B). The communist dictator of Albania Enver Hoxha sided with PRC in its conflict with Soviet Union. By 1963, even the diplomatic relations between Albania and the USSR were broken, and Hoxha's regime used a relatively obscure date to demonstrate his disagreement with Soviet leadership. Even more interesting was the issuing of a set of four stamps commemorating an unusual date – Stalin's 90th birthday – in 1969. After the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by the armies of the Warsaw pact, Albania, which nominally remained a member of the Warsaw Pact, withdrew from the pact to avoid occupation for its own deviation from Soviet general line, although that deviation was an exact opposite of Czechoslovakia's. The set displayed the determination of Albanian leaders to continue on their own path.

Interestingly, Stalin was never depicted on stamps of North Korea. Moreover, its nominal ideological father Karl Marx appeared only four times and Lenin only seven times in 60 years, with the last Lenin stamp issued 40 years ago. This statistics, together with ideological content of other stamps of North Korea, strongly supports the notion that North Korea is not, and never has been, a true communist state, but a strictly nationalistic dictatorship.17

As to the Western countries, only one stamp was ever issued with Stalin on it. It was included in a large Belgian set commemorating significant events and personalities of XX century. The artist created a visual representation of Stalin's role in the history of the twentieth century as viewed from the capital of Europe (Figure 17). The design consists of two layers. In the background, there is a photograph of the Big Three during Yalta conference of 1945, when leaders of the West surrendered Eastern Europe to Soviet domination and the Cold War began. The foreground is a contour map of Europe with bold red dots showing the border that would divide Europe for the following 45 years and representing a visual metaphor for the Iron curtain. Although the overall design looks somewhat busy, it presents a historic fact and its consequences in a compelling way.
Conclusion

The use of Stalin's image and name on stamps provides valuable insights into the history of the world Marxist movement, especially its Stalinist version. These stamps were often targeted at international audiences, reflected major political events and in many cases elucidated hidden political developments. Over time, Stalin's philatelic image went through several stages of development. First an iconic symbol of the Soviet leadership, after WWII it became the central symbol of Soviet Victory. Later, his image was used to promote the world-wide communist movement and to support the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and in China.

Current public polls in Russia indicate that Stalin is again considered by many respondents as the most successful national leader. This myth encompasses nationalism and nostalgia for social order and lost status of a superpower. Today's Russian political leadership seems to distance itself from this view. Notably, this year, Stalin did not appear on any Russian stamps commemorating 75 years of Victory. Let us hope that this omission is not accidental.

Notes


2 All illustrations are from the author's collection.
The set was designed by Naum Borov, Grigorii Zamskoii (also Zamskii), and Iulii Ganf. Zamskoii worked as a designer and artist on posters, Soviet exhibits abroad, and as interior decorator of Moscow subway (the latter with Borov). After the war, he specialized in anti-Western caricatures in the genre of black propaganda.


The abundance of Hitler's portraits on stamps might have been driven in part by his personal greed: he received royalties for every reproduction of his likeness on stamps (Speer, Albert. *Inside the Third Reich: memoirs.* NY:Simon & Schuster, 1970, p. 87).

For instance, in 1925 Stalin protested against the renaming of the city of Tsaritsyn to Stalingrad: "I found out that Tsaritsyn is going to be renamed Stalingrad<…>I did not and do not insist on renaming Tsaritsyn to Stalingrad<…>I strive neither for glory, nor for tribute, and don't want do create a wrong impression." (I. Stalin. Letter to the secretary of Tsaritsyn regional party organization B. P. Sheboldaev. January 25, 1925. Cit. in: *Kommersant-Vlast'* No. 4 (858), February 1, 2010; http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1311514 Last accessed November 3, 2010). Despite the protest, the city was renamed. In another case, Stalin wrote in response to a plan to publish a collection of stories from his childhood for children: "I am decisively opposed to the publication of 'Stories of Stalin's Childhood'. The author has been misled by <…> sycophants. <…> Most important is that the book has a tendency to inculcate in the consciousness of Soviet children (and people in general) a cult of personalities, great leaders and infallible heroes. That is dangerous and harmful. The theory of the 'heroes' and the 'mob' is not a Bolshevik theory but an SR [social-revolutionaries] one. <…> This little book will assist the SRs. Every such book will contribute to the SRs and will harm our general Bolshevik cause. I advise you to burn the book. I. Stalin. 16.11.1938." (Cit. in Branderberger, David. *Stalin as


9 This falsification had been initiated in 1929 by K. Voroshilov, who is depicted on the same stamp as the rider on the right greeting Stalin. See Voroshilov, Kliment E. Stalin i Krasnaia Armiia. [Stalin and the Red Army]. Pravda, December 23, 1929.

10 The monument had to be demolished at the beginning of WWII as it was a perfect landmark for German pilots. See http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=293874&m=1 Last accessed September 4, 2010.


14 In 1949, the head of Darien organization of the Communist party Gao Gang proposed to join the USSR as the 17th republic (Heinzig, Dieter. The Soviet Union and communist China, 1945-1950: the arduous road to the alliance. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004, p. 215). Several years later, this political mistake led to Gao Gang's arrest and death.


Bibliography

