It has been noted by many authors, particularly by David Scott in his fundamental work on European stamp design, that stamps are used as propaganda primarily for international audiences. Soviet postcards discussed by Dr. Moskoff were intended, on the contrary, exclusively for domestic audience; in fact, some of them had inscriptions "For domestic mailing only." Thus, my discussion of Stalinist propaganda on stamps will be in certain sense complementary to Dr. Moskoff's. I am going to focus on the use of Stalin's image on stamps and the relation of these stamps to contemporaneous political circumstances. Surprisingly, very little has been published on this subject.

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 This concept has been replaced by that of a complex, shrewd, industrious politician, a man with many talents and a criminal mind.

A few words about Stalin's life. He was born Iosif Dzhugashvili in 1879 in the small Georgian town of Gori. By the age of 20, Stalin became a faithful follower of Lenin's version of Marxism and an underground radical activist. 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. In 1929, Stalin turned 50. By that time, 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 with Stalin's leadership, and during the XVII Congress of the Bolshevik party in January 1934 the results of the party elections had to be rigged to give Stalin enough votes. According to most historians, this was the first step in establishing his dictatorship.
These are the circumstances when the first Soviet stamp depicting Stalin appeared as the high value of the set "Ten years without Lenin," in November 1934, ten months after the actual commemorative date. The design of the stamp included a visual representation of the formula "Stalin is the Lenin of today".

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The designers chose a rather rare artistic device of "double profile." 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. The only earlier design representing this formula as a double profile that I was able to find appeared in "Pravda" in 1933, and in that case Lenin looked more like a ghost.

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Even several years later, Soviet artists experienced obvious difficulties in creating integrated double compositions of Lenin-Stalin as illustrated by a poster from 1939 and a postcard of 1943. On the poster, only silhouettes are shown, while on the postcard Lenin looks even more "ghostly" than in 1933.

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. This is an important point discussed earlier by Dr. Child in respect of stamps of Argentina, but never explored in case of Soviet stamps. As historic documents, stamps not only reflect past events, but can also serve as indications of the future.

Visual elements of the Stalin stamp of 1934 successfully appealed to Soviet people, presenting simple, familiar icons.

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At the same time, despite the limitations of the Cyrillic alphabet, the symbolism of the stamp appealed to international audience. The amount of writing was kept at a minimum. The profiles of Lenin and Stalin were already well known throughout the world. People are marching with huge banners, and this powerful picture was emphasized by crimson red color with light orange background, creating a clear association with fire.
The artfully fading background added theatrical quality to the design. The stamp was obviously intended for foreign philatelic markets: it paid the rates for foreign airmail postcards and for letters to Central Europe.

Stalin's attitude towards his own cult of personality was highly hypocritical and driven by political considerations. Here is, for example, his 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. I advise you to burn the book. 1938."

At the same time, 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.

In my research, I was not able to find any information on the mechanism of decision-making to issue particular Soviet stamps prior to 1965, when a special decree created a public committee in charge of the new issues. In any event, there is evidence that at least in some cases these decisions occurred at the highest level of power. Those responsible for the design of Soviet stamps realized that propaganda on stamps had a potential to reach larger international audience than probably any other media, and were mindful not to overdo it.

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 in 1941, Stalin was not the head of the USSR in any official capacity, but just one of several technically equal secretaries of the Central committee. Thus, there was no formal justification to put him on definitive stamps; the head of the Soviet Union was the nominal president Kalinin, and he did appear on stamps in 1935. Of course, in the ideologically charged atmosphere of the 1930s, some commemorative stamps incorporated Stalin's image, although not dedicated to him personally. One such instance was the set "Twenty years of the Red Army" of 1938.

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The picture on the stamp reproduced the painting “Stalin greets the First Cavalry Army.” This painting contributed to the 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. As mentioned by Dr. Moskoff, this falsification had been initiated by Voroshilov. 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.

The third pre-war stamp that featured Stalin was issued in the set “All-Union Agricultural Exhibition” of 1940.

The monument to Stalin, one of the largest of its kind, stood in front of one of the pavilions. It is interesting to compare the composition of the stamp with the composition of the postcard showing the same subject. Postcards circulated mostly within the country, and therefore were directed at domestic audience. On the stamp, the monument is shifted aside, and the pavilion which symbolized 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.

In addition to stamps whose design had easily recognizable images of Stalin, his inconspicuous presence could be uncovered on many more issues. I would define these as "cryptic appearances." They played only marginal role as propaganda, but rather reflected the realities of everyday life in the Soviet Union. One example of such a cryptic appearance is a 1938 stamp from the set dedicated to the 20th anniversary of Komsomol.

Here young members of the Komsomol hold books with the names of Lenin and Stalin on their covers as one can see with proper magnification. But we can safely 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 of the country. However, the leadership of the country realized that the communist ideology and Stalin's personality did not provide strong enough
motivation to fight and that some people could even blame Stalin for the early disasters in the war. The commander-in-chief did not appear on Soviet stamps before the outcome of the war had been decided. Especially interesting is the 1942 year set. Twenty stamps were issued, as compared with sixty in a typical pre-war year, and none of them displayed any signs of official ideology. Moreover, I was not able to find either Stalin's name, or portrait, or profile on any propaganda stationary issued before the beginning of 1943. Only when the immediate mortal danger for the Soviet Union had passed, communist propaganda and its central figure reappeared on stamps. For the first time during the war Stalin was depicted together with Lenin in the set commemorating 25 years of the Bolshevik revolution.

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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 rate, included Moscow Kremlin towers as the embodiment of the national unity, portraits of Lenin and Stalin, and rays shining from behind the Kremlin, symbolizing the bright communist future. By that moment, Soviet victory at Stalingrad 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 the addition of a second "Lenin-Stalin" stamp in different colors.

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Now these two stamps were the lowest and the highest values of the issue. The set was intended primarily for international philatelic markets because it could have been nicely arranged on an album page and the new high value of 3 rubles was way too high for any standard rate.

In January 1945, the Lenin-Stalin profile appeared on the stamp depicting a medal for Soviet partisans.

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This stamp was the first of several that showed Stalin indirectly on various medals and awards. Most importantly, his profile appeared on the most common medals awarded
to all who fought in the war and to all who participated in the war effort. The Victory was achieved at the cost of about 27 million lives and enormous heroism and suffering of the Soviet people, but it has been appropriated by a single man. We know now none of a dozen of essays of the Victory medal submitted by major Soviet artists included Stalin. It was definitely his decision to place his profile on these medals.

Stalin as the sole figure representing Soviet Victory in the war 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 awards. Thus, almost identical stamps commemorating anniversaries of the revolution in 1951 and 1952 both imitated sculpted bas-reliefs of Stalin and Lenin.

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The design of these portraits conveyed a sense of lasting, if not eternal, power.

As noted by many historians and contemporaries, after the war ideological pressure in general and Stalin's cult of personality in particular became overwhelming. Nevertheless, it seems that Stalin himself retained some ambivalence towards his appearance on stamps. One striking example of this attitude is his absence from stamps dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the October revolution. A recently published catalog reproduces essays of these stamps with Stalin portrayed on each of them.

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The actual issued set had no Stalin. Again, I would like to emphasize that the decision to change the design could only have been made by Stalin personally, nobody else would have dared to do it. I take it as evidence 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 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 relatively minor events.
On both issues, the artists succeeded in conveying a feeling of youth, energy, dynamism and popular admiration. This seems to be unique to Soviet propaganda: no other totalitarian regime of the era came up with a similar design on stamps.

In December of 1949, Stalin officially turned 70. To celebrate his birthday, Soviet postal authorities issued a well-known souvenir sheet consisting of four stamps. This is, strictly speaking, the only Soviet issue dedicated to Stalin personally.

The first stamp showed the hut in Gori, Georgia, in which Stalin was born to a family of a 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 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 of the sheet was based on a photograph of Stalin visiting the gravely ill Lenin to prove their closeness. Finally, the fourth stamp showed Stalin in his office in full uniform as the victorious generalissimo.

The design of the souvenir sheet was intented 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, the 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.

At approximately the same time, the end of 1949, Soviet propaganda began the so-called "world peace campaign." Naturally, Stalin was present on "Peace" stamps either as a portrait on a wall, or as the author of a slogan or a quotation.

Of course, other socialist countries issued their own "peace campaign" stamps, and some artists proved to be more ingenious than their Soviet colleagues. For example, a
Bulgarian designer transformed a well-known portrait of Stalin by adding the pigeon of peace.

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From an ideological point of view, an important stamp was issued in the USSR in 1950 to commemorate Labor Day.

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This is the first image of the "foursome" of communist saints on a stamp. Although this arrangement already appeared on a Soviet postcard and a poster in 1939, the stamp gave it international exposure. The composition emphasized the direct continuity of the world Marxist leadership from Marx himself to Stalin. Back in 1939, the USSR was the only Marxist state, and this continuity was rather unquestionable. After the war, there were communist regimes in a dozen new countries, and some of them had already deviated from Stalin's "general line." At that point, Soviet control should have been enforced by a strong message reiterating the succession going from Marx through Lenin to Stalin.

As I mentioned before, commemoration of certain events by issuing propaganda stamps, or, on the contrary, the disregard of certain events not only reflected certain political undercurrents, but in some cases anticipated coming changes, especially in case of totalitarian regimes.

One remarkable example of this phenomenon was the fact that Soviet Union did not issue any mourning stamps upon Stalin's death on March 5, 1953. When Lenin died in 1924, mourning stamps were produced within five days. When Soviet president Kalinin died in 1946, the mourning stamp was issued in two days. Nothing of this sort happened after Stalin's death. The reason for that was that Stalin did not appoint his successor, and the struggle for power among members of the politburo began already at his deathbed. The direction of the country was not clear, and, since there were no Soviet stamps free of ideology at that time, the confusion was reflected 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.

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 Russian Social-democratic party, a faction of which became the Bolshevik party. Stalin
was nowhere to be found on the stamps. His conspicuous absence from such an ideologically important issue revealed the developing changes in the official attitude towards Stalin's legacy.

Finally, in March 1954, Soviet Union issued a stamp to commemorate one year since Stalin's death.

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He was depicted in a military uniform that he wore after 1943, when the shoulder straps were introduced in the Red Army; this timing emphasized his role in the Victory. The design of the stamp was rather reserved. Next, a set of two stamps was issued in December of 1954 to commemorate 75 years since Stalin's birth. 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 (on the right). Here, three colors and a much more aggrandizing style were used, in line with the East German 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. For the second time Stalin appeared on a Soviet issue within the group of the four Marxist saints.

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This suggested that at least some members of the Soviet political elite still considered 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 country. By that time, Stalin disappeared from the stamps of most socialist countries, in particular from Soviet and Russian stamps for the next 40 years.

At the time of Khrushchev's report, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and especially East Germany had strong Stalinists at the helm and only grudgingly accepted the change. In particular, the only definitive stamp in the world with Stalin's name on it has been issued by GDR in 1953.

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The 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. Moreover, Stalin appeared on a GDR stamp commemorating 25 years of Potsdam conference as late as 1970, the only such occurrence in European socialist countries after 1956.

With the relaxation of ideological constraints in communist countries after Stalin's death, people began using stamps with his image to express their political views.

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For instance, in June 1956 one Mr. Anastassov from Bulgaria combined three stamps to pay correct postage to Turkey and to show his attitude toward the late Stalin.

Finding themselves ousted from ideological mainstream, hard-core Stalinists produced most items of this sort. 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.

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Meanwhile, two countries, People's Republic of China and Albania, remained the strongholds of Stalinism both before and long after 1956.

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.

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Although other communist dictators were shown on stamps together with Stalin, here the closeness of Stalin and Mao is emphasized by their handshake. Close personal relationship between the leaders was illustrated once again (posthumously for Stalin) on a stamp commemorating five years of the treaty.

The next Chinese set with Stalin was dedicated to the 35th anniversary of the Russian revolution in 1952. The first stamp reproduced the painting “Lenin declares Soviet Rule,” in which young Stalin stands right behind Lenin, which was a complete historical fiction. The green stamp shows Stalin and Mao strolling in the Kremlin. The third stamp reproduces the central part of 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 is related to the revolution and shows its leader Lenin. This set reflects a major shift in Soviet ideology that was never explicitly spelled out by Soviet propaganda: after the WWII, Stalin replaced Lenin as the main figure in the hierarchy of the greatest communists. The set was issued a 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.

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Here Lenin is shown in a submissive position listening to overbearing Stalin. This sculpture was unveiled in 1949 in Moscow to great critical acclaim.

After 1956, the appearance of Stalin on stamps of PRC often expressed a dissent or a direct confrontation with the Soviet leadership. Thus, the foursome of Marxist saints appeared on Chinese stamps in 1964 on a minor occasion of the Labor Day.

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The relationship between PRC and Soviet Union at that time was deteriorating. 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.

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.

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The communist dictator of Albania Enver Hoxha sided with China in its conflict with Soviet Union. By 1963, Albania and the USSR even broke off diplomatic relations, and Hoxha's regime used a relatively obscure date, 20 years of the battle of Stalingrad, to demonstrate his disagreement with Soviet leadership. At that time, Albania nominally remained a member of the Warsaw Pact. Thus, 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 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.

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.

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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 effectively started the Cold War. 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 targeted primarily at international audiences, reflected major political events and often 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 power of national dictators 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 of three Russian issues dedicated to 75 years of Victory. Let us hope that this omission is not accidental.