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**DICTATORS AND LEADERSHIP:
LESSONS FROM STALIN AND MAO**

GRAEME GILL

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DICTATORS AND LEADERSHIP: LESSONS FROM STALIN AND MAO

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ABSTRACT

The accepted wisdom about dictators is that they rule their political systems in an essentially arbitrary and willful manner. Their leadership colleagues are said to live in constant fear of the dictator, always vulnerable to his will and always looking to defend themselves against him. The leadership is shown as a Hobbesian “war of all against all” as the leader rules with no real restraint. This paper challenges that view. It will explain why such a view of leadership politics in authoritarian systems is inadequate, and will illustrate this by looking at two of the most egregious dictators of the twentieth century, Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong.

RESUMEN

Es una creencia común que los dictadores gobiernan sus sistemas políticos a voluntad y de un modo esencialmente arbitrario. Se dice que quienes los acompañan en el ejercicio del liderazgo viven con miedo del dictador, siempre vulnerables a su voluntad y siempre buscando defenderse de él. En la medida en que los dictadores gobiernan sin ningún freno real, esta forma de liderazgo se muestra como una guerra hobbesiana de todos contra todos. El presente artículo desafía ese modo de ver las cosas. Explica por qué tal visión del liderazgo político en los sistemas autoritarios es inadecuada e ilustra este argumento analizando dos de los más aberrantes dictadores del siglo XX: Joseph Stalin y Mao Tsé Tung.

Individual dictators have been a common focus of scholarly attention, something that should not be surprising given the frequency with which they appear historically and the common perception that they play a decisive role in their particular countries. Much of the research on such leaders has taken the form of biography, often with the explicit aim of seeking to understand their actions through reference to their individual life histories. This is a worthy aim, but all too often the focus on the individual obscures the immediate context within which he (and they have overwhelmingly been male) operated. Such studies have generally not questioned the accepted wisdom about how dictators function. This accepted wisdom stemmed from the very notion of dictatorship itself, which implied a ruler who had absolute power.¹ Reflected in the totalitarian school which emerged in the 1950s,² this view of power unlimited by institutional constraints became embedded in the literature; such power was seen to be the key distinguishing factor between the democratic leader who has to operate within a framework of institutional constraints and the authoritarian leader who does not have to contend with such limitations. The corollary of this view of the dictator is that his will is supreme, unfettered by resistance, rules, or institutions. He exercises arbitrary control and does what he likes; he is a tyrant.³ As a result, those within his immediate sphere are continually in fear for their lives. They have no institutional defenses against the leader, a fact that encourages continual conflict between them as they struggle to gain the leader's favor and to protect themselves. The result is almost a Hobbesian war of all against all. There is no pattern or rule to the conduct of politics, with the will of the leader the only constant.

But is elite politics in authoritarian systems really always like this? In dictatorships, can there be no constancy or predictability? Is the leader all-powerful and are his colleagues always cowering in fear of his displeasure? It is difficult to see such a

¹ This is the essence of the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary. But the term does remain elusive. One recent scholar seems to rob it of all but the most general of meanings when he equates "dictator" with "authoritarian leader," meaning the leader of an authoritarian regime. Milan W. Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 23.

² For the classic statements, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1986, first published 1951), and Carl J. Friedrich & Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge [Mass]: Harvard University Press, 1956).

³ And this is the term frequently used in the literature. For example, Daniel Chirot, *Modern Tyrants: The Power and Prevalence of Evil in Our Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) and Barry Rubin, *Modern Dictators: A History of Tyranny in the Third World* (London: W.H. Allen, 1987).

system of rule lasting for any length of time. The argument of this paper is that despite this established wisdom,⁴ authoritarian rule is not always the dog-eat-dog situation much of the literature presents.

One of the sources of this view of life at the top of an authoritarian regime as being characterized by uncertainty and vulnerability to the dictator's will is that scholars have often failed to appreciate that even under dictatorship, leadership is not without structure. It is usually not the situation that the leadership group exists in a void, with its members almost free-floating and there simply because of their relationship with the dictator. In most cases, authoritarian leaderships do have some structure, and this has direct implications for the way they function. Two aspects of structure are important: the nature of the dictator's position and power, and the nature of his leadership colleagues.

Dictators are not all the same in the power they wield and the dominance they can exercise. Despite the well-recognized difficulty of measuring power, we can distinguish between two types of dictator, the predominant and the dominant. This distinction refers to the relationship between the dictator and the immediate leadership group around him that is the focus of this paper. The first, the predominant dictator, is one who is clearly the most powerful in the group but does not override all of his colleagues whenever he wishes. He may be first among equals or he may be more powerful than that, but generally he works within and through the leadership group rather than simply commanding it. In contrast, the dominant dictator ignores his colleagues at will. He is sufficiently powerful to override their wishes whenever he feels like it and is more powerful than all of them combined. The distinction between these two types may be clear in the abstract, but in practice it can be more complicated and messy. A dictator's power may vary over time and policy sectors, he may or may not choose to exercise power at particular times and on particular issues, and his power may take a variety of forms that are not always easy to see. But despite the difficulties in operationalizing this distinction, it is one that is useful for our gaining an understanding of the nature of authoritarian rule.

⁴ For a sophisticated analysis that still comes up with this view, see Svobik (2012). Also see Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright & Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

The second element of structure relates to the dictator's leadership colleagues. These are the people, referred to in this paper as oligarchs, who inhabit the top positions in the political system. They are the people who surround the dictator, exercise power at the apex of the system, and are sometimes seen as his cronies. Compared to those below them, and especially the general populace, they are very powerful. Compared to the dictator, their power is rather more modest.

For the view of these people as being vulnerable to the dictator, at his beck and call and always in danger of being removed or even killed, scholars often emphasize the "crony" aspect of the relationship. This implies that they are in leadership posts purely because of their relationship with the dictator, and were that relationship to sour, their continued presence in the leadership would be under threat. There is a sense in which this is true. An oligarch whose position rests only on his personal relationship with the dictator is vulnerable to changes in that relationship. But the reverse also applies: personal relationships predating the dictator coming to power can provide a basis of trust and continuing mutual support that offsets the presumed vulnerability. Established relationships, even if they undergo change when the dictator comes to power, can affect relations between the dictator and other oligarchs, including providing a basis for his preference for some over others. For those predominant dictators who seek to create a factional basis for their rule, such relationships can act as a foundation upon which such factions can rest. Such established relationships—and the trust that they may involve—can also mean that the oligarch will enjoy greater freedom of movement and individual autonomy from the dictator than would otherwise have been the case. It also means that the situation in these leadership circles is never one of the dictator versus the rest; some of the oligarchs will inevitably be supporters of the dictator, almost regardless of what happens.

Personal relationships may have existed among the other oligarchs as well. Where those relations were amicable or cooperative, carried forward into power they can provide a basis for solidarity that can underpin faction creation, or simply constitute an ideational basis for cooperation. This could be important should the oligarchs (or a section of them) believe they need to defend themselves against potential attack by a dictator. It could also be important in any conflict that erupted among the oligarchs themselves. When such conflict occurs, perhaps in the competitive quest for the dictator's benevolence or in the

struggle for power or resources, organizing among themselves is a logical response, and prior personal relations can help to ease the creation of such an organization. Prior hostile relations among the oligarchs can have the opposite effect, providing a basis for the generation of such oligarch conflict. If the dictator stays above such conflict as it unrolls, it may enhance his power over his colleagues.

But personal relations are not the only and perhaps not even the most important factor in defining the nature of the oligarchs. Central to this is the institutional roles the oligarchs occupy. In most authoritarian systems, the oligarchs are formally members of a leading council, like a politburo, cabinet, or junta, with the dictator the chief officer of that body. But while a council seat may be the position that signifies membership in the ruling group, it is usually not the only post oligarchs occupy. Usually they will also head one of the bureaucratic hierarchies of which the system consists. Most common has been oligarchs who are also government ministers, heading government departments whose task it is to administer some sector of national life. Common too have been the heads of the security service and of the military, with the latter sometimes represented by a number of people from the different arms of the military. The head of the ruling political party may sometimes also appear in this group. Often this other job is the oligarch's main one, in the sense that it takes up more time than his involvement in the activities of the narrow ruling group, but ultimately it is his recognition as an oligarch through membership in the ruling group that is of greater political importance.

Their roles heading these different bureaucratic structures anchor the oligarchs in the institutional structure of the regime. These posts can also color their activity in the arena of oligarch politics and affect their relationship with the dictator. As head of a government department, for example, an oligarch acquires a potential power base that can feed into his capacity to play an independent role in the affairs of the leadership group. Rather than being an individual speaking on his own behalf, he is a representative of the bureaucratic department and can speak with the authority and expertise of that institution behind him. All government departments are potential sources of power within the bureaucratic power structure that is the regime. Some departments are more prestigious and powerful than others (e.g., defense is usually more powerful than health), and have greater weight in bureaucratic councils, especially in their areas of expertise. Individual oligarchs

may use their control of their bureaucratic homes to structure debate within the ruling council by shaping the way in which issues coming before that council are framed. This means that they may be able to exercise greater influence on the framing of issues than the usual picture of the “dictator in control” provides for, while the expertise emanating from their bureaucratic power structure may add increased authority to their views in the discussion.

The expertise vested in these organizations, be they government department, arm of the coercive apparatus or political party, can also expand oligarch autonomy from the dictator in another way. The dictator cannot deal with everything, and the ruling council cannot decide upon all measures. There are simply too many things that arise that must be handled on a day-to-day basis for them all to come before the ruling group as a whole or the dictator personally. These matters tend to be handled by bureaucratic structures (especially government departments), and the oligarch leader of such a structure thereby has the opportunity to carve out for himself a sphere of activity largely autonomous from the ruling group. The latter may exercise general oversight, but it tends not to micromanage everything. Of course in principle the dictator (or the ruling group as a whole) could decide not to permit such decentralization, but the result would be likely to be either (or both) an overloading of the center or many things simply would not get done. Either of these outcomes could have significant consequences for regime performance, stability, and survival. Consequently, oligarchs usually enjoy some autonomy in the their bureaucratic power bases’ spheres of professional activity.

Possession of a bureaucratic power base in this way can make an oligarch more powerful vis-à-vis the dictator than he would otherwise have been. The oligarch’s ability to mobilize his potential bureaucratic power into the arena within which he and the dictator interact can be crucial in this regard. An oligarch who effectively controls his bureaucratic constituency may be able to use this control to both enhance his policy influence and protect himself against an attack from the dictator. The best example of this may relate to the military and security machines. Because of the coercive power these bodies command, the dictator may be unwilling to move against the oligarchs at their head in order not to generate a threat to his own position. Or in other spheres, a dictator may be dissuaded from

acting against an oligarch if he believes that by so doing he will put offside a major bureaucratic constituency that it would be better to retain onside.

Occupation of the leading positions in bodies such as government departments or the security apparatus potentially gives oligarchs their own bureaucratic constituencies. They can mobilize them for their own purposes, but they also need to protect, defend, and extend the interests of those constituencies. The result is that the oligarchs often get caught up in the bureaucratic politics present in all regimes. Struggles over budget priorities, access to resources, responsibility for the completion of tasks, and general primacy are as characteristic of authoritarian regimes as they are of democratic. Oligarchs must become involved in such struggles, not only to strengthen their power bases, but to ensure that those bases continue to support them. As a result, an often significant part of oligarch political life is spent interacting with other oligarchs on these sorts of issues, struggling over resource allocation decisions and budget priorities based less upon consideration of broad regime aims than of narrower bureaucratic interests. Such conflict can be very time consuming for the oligarchs, and it can be a source of division among them. The dictator may not be immune from such conflicts, but because he is usually at the head of the principal bureaucratic structure (e.g., as the national president), he often stands above such infighting. Other oligarchs may seek to recruit him to their side in these conflicts, but he will often prefer to remain uninvolved.

So the fact that the oligarchs usually combine their positions within the ruling group with a post at the head of one of the bureaucratic machines provides them with some capacity to place some distance between themselves and the dictator. While ultimately they may remain dependent on the dictator (he could dismiss them if he wished), their control over bureaucratic resources creates a sort of dependence that runs the other way: the dictator needs them to carry out their jobs if the system is to continue to function and thereby increase its prospects of survival. They may not be wholly the creatures of the dictator, even when his power is overwhelming.

One way of approaching this issue is through analysis of the leadership systems of particular authoritarian leaders. For many, two of the most egregious dictators of the

twentieth century were Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong.⁵ Their names were almost watchwords for arbitrary and violent rule, their reputations forever tarnished by, respectively, the Great Terror that caught up so many in the Soviet Union of the 1930s and China's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, in which millions died and the ruling elite was destroyed. Both held personal power in the state for a broadly similar period of time—Stalin from around 1930 until his death in 1953, Mao from 1949 (although actually earlier, before the revolution was victorious) until his death in 1976—and both periods of rule may be divided into two parts: one in which the leader did not exercise overwhelming power (Stalin 1930–34, Mao 1949–66) and one when he did (the remainder in both cases). Through analyzing the way elite politics was played out during these periods, we should get an idea of the nature of the dictator's power and his relations with his leadership colleagues. Given the similar institutional structures of the two communist regimes⁶ and the fact that they both claimed to be led by a collective leadership, the opportunity to see the effect of their leadership styles and their relationship with their colleagues, should be enhanced.⁷

The focus of analysis in both countries is upon those members of the leadership who were at the top of the party structure, principally members of the politburo and, when they were not in the politburo, central committee (CC) secretaries. These people constituted the oligarchy. There was also a broader elite, comprising leading officials who were not in the oligarchy. The most important of these were members of the central

⁵ Generally scholars of both the Soviet Union and China have been reluctant to use the term “dictator” with reference to Stalin and Mao, although this reluctance seems to have been much stronger with regard to Mao than to Stalin. It is not really clear why there has been this reluctance given that the power both were able to wield clearly elevates them into this category, especially if we were to adopt the permissive usage of Svolik in equating “dictator” with leader of an authoritarian regime. Svolik (2012), p. 23. For two recent studies that do use this term, see Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin. New Biography of a Dictator* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), and Frank Dikotter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History 1962–1976* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), ch.1.

⁶ They were not the same. The Chinese party had a Chairman and from 1956 the key decision-making body was the Politburo Standing Committee, while the Soviet party had neither of these institutions.

⁷ For a recent excellent study that devotes significant attention to Stalin and Mao, see A. James McAdams, *Vanguard of the Revolution: The Global Idea of the Communist Party* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

committee and government ministers. Formally, the oligarchs were responsible to the elite, but this notion soon ceased to have practical import.

THE PRECURSOR OF LEADERSHIP POLITICS

By the time Stalin had achieved a position of primacy within the leadership, around 1930, there was already a decade of experience of elite politics, that had produced a variety of principles and practices underpinning that politics and dictating the way in which it was played out.⁸ Rather than a predominant leader, shifting coalitions of oligarchs came into conflict over policy issues. These conflicts were formally resolved in the leading institutional arenas of the party in a relatively open fashion (following the displacement of the leading state organ, Sovnarkom, by party bodies after Lenin died⁹), but increasingly as the 1920s progressed, these decisions were affected by the way in which Stalin's leadership of the party's secretarial apparatus (i.e., the central party bureaucracy) enabled him to shape the membership and functioning of those institutional arenas, the Congress and the Central Committee (CC). But both arenas, the Congress until 1925 and the CC until the end of the decade, were vigorous discussion fora within which the major policy lines were debated and oligarch conflict formally resolved.

The position that Stalin had been able to achieve by 1930 was the result of a series of factional conflicts in the 1920s that resulted in the defeat of successive opposition groups—the Trotskyists, Left Opposition, United Opposition, and Right Opposition—through a combination of policy appeal, judicious delegate selection to the Congress and CC, and bureaucratic manipulation. These opposition groups had been led by what were to become known as “Old Bolsheviks,” party members of pre-revolutionary standing, many of whose status in the revolutionary movement and its history outshone that of Stalin. Their defeat meant that, by the end of 1930, those Old Bolsheviks who opposed Stalin had been removed from that central oligarch institution, the Politburo. Stalin's

⁸ These are discussed in more detail in Graeme Gill, *Collective Leadership in Soviet Politics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), chs. 2 & 3.

⁹ On the importance of Sovnarkom in the initial years of Soviet power and its subsequent displacement, see T.H. Rigby, *Lenin's Government. Sovnarkom 1917–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Lara Douds, *Inside Lenin's Government: Ideology, Power and Practice in the Early Soviet State* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

predominance in the leadership stemmed less from his revolutionary heritage than from his bureaucratic standing, his position as general secretary—therefore in charge of the party apparatus¹⁰—and the policy positions he had espoused.

In contrast to the Soviet Union, the principles relating to the Chinese case stemmed directly from the pre-revolutionary period in China, where party circumstances were different. Following the Long March in the mid-1930s, the Communist Party was actually in control of territory and so had to establish an administration in a way that the pre-revolutionary Russian party did not have to do. But the Chinese case was complicated; as well as the revolutionary base areas, which for part of this time were potentially in danger from Japanese and Guomindang (Nationalist Party of China) forces, the party was also active behind enemy lines in the so-called white areas (areas outside party control). Despite rhetorical assertions of firm discipline and centralization, the party could not act as a single united entity in both types of areas. In practice, significant leeway had to be allowed party organs so they could both function and survive in the different conditions.

In contrast to the white areas where the party was an underground organization, in Yan'an the main part of the leadership was congregated and the collective central organs of the party were located and functioned in a more or less regularized fashion. But an important part of this order was recognition of the special position occupied by Mao. The new party Constitution adopted at the Seventh Congress of the party in 1945 had enshrined his “ideas” as “the guiding principles of all its work,”¹¹ thereby embedding Mao’s primacy in the fundamental law of the party. This reinforced an earlier decision in 1943 authorizing Mao alone to resolve matters being considered by the party Secretariat.¹² This does not mean that Mao was all-powerful. Although he was acknowledged as the principal leader whose views carried extra weight, he was not surrounded by acolytes who would accept his word without question. The leadership comprised people from a wide spectrum within the

¹⁰ Central to this power was his ability to place supporters in positions of responsibility in that apparatus. See Gill (2018), pp. 66–70.

¹¹ “Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party (June 11, 1945),” in Conrad Brandt, Benjamin Schwartz & John K. Fairbank (eds.), *A Documentary History of Chinese Communism* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), p. 422.

¹² Frederick C. Teiwes, “The Establishment and Consolidation of the New Regime, 1949–1957,” in Roderick MacFarquhar (ed.), *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People’s Republic of China*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 12.

party, including some who had had differences with Mao in the past, and the policy process has been described as “flexible and consultative”.¹³ Nevertheless, within this collective Mao was predominant, but that position rested more on a type of personalized charismatic authority than upon bureaucratic office.¹⁴

The norms that had emerged in China at this time to govern elite relations were essentially the same as those that had emerged in the USSR in the 1920s.¹⁵

- Policy disagreement is legitimate but must be contained within the bounds of the party.
- The Congress and CC are the appropriate arenas within which such conflict is to be resolved, although this became less true in the Soviet Union the further the decade went on.
- Manipulation of those arenas (e.g., through delegate selection and design of the agenda) is acceptable, providing you win.
- Defeat on an issue meant neither necessary expulsion from the party nor death.
- Leadership was collective, but there was recognition of the possibility of individual prominence.¹⁶

Thus by 1930 in the Soviet Union and 1949 in China, there were norms in the party designed to structure the politics of the oligarchs.

THE PREDOMINANT LEADER

The periods of leader predominance were very different in length: Stalin from 1930 until around the end of 1934, Mao from 1949 until 1966. Both were shaped by the heritage that went before, as sketched above.

The upper levels of the oligarchy were very stable in the Soviet Union during this period. Of the thirteen members of the Politburo in December 1930,¹⁷ all were re-elected in February 1934 although one (Rudzutak) was dropped from full to candidate status, with

¹³ Frederick C. Teiwes, “Mao Zedong in Power (1949–1976),” in William A. Joseph (ed.), *Politics in China: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 75.

¹⁴ For the classic statement on charisma, see Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978), vol. 2, ch. xiv.

¹⁵ In the Soviet case, the norms had their roots in the pre-revolution practices of the party, particularly that part of the party in exile.

¹⁶ This was manifested in the Soviet Union most clearly in the position of Lenin, but there were also predecessors such as Plekhanov and Martov.

¹⁷ The leading Right Opposition figure Aleksei Rykov who had been retained in the Politburo at the XVI Congress in July 1930 was dropped in December.

only one newcomer (Andreev) coming into the body. Among the core of the oligarchs, the membership stability is consistent with a lack of a sense of threat coming from Stalin. But what became evident during this time was the isolation of oligarch politics from the other elite organs, the Congress and CC. Neither body was able to exercise a decisive influence on the course of oligarch politics, which was now to a large extent insulated from the broader elite. Certainly especially in the early part of this period, the oligarchs looked warily toward the CC. They sought to keep their differences behind closed doors and away from the CC, aware that there were within the CC clear reservations about the recent policy of agricultural collectivization and how it had been carried out. Although oppositionists could still speak out in the CC and plena were sometimes the venue for attacks on the opposition, they were no longer the venue for the resolution of differences among the oligarchs.

Stalin was deeply involved in policy discussions during this time. During the early part of this period, the Politburo retained the essential role it had played in the 1920s. It was the formal arena within which oligarch differences were aired, and much policy discussion occurred. However its role as a collective organ declined significantly: in 1933 and 1934 it met on many fewer occasions than in earlier years, and handled many fewer questions while in session. At the same time, the number of questions handled by the Politburo outside formal sessions (i.e., either by circulation among the members or formal approval of decisions made elsewhere) increased markedly.¹⁸ One of the most important of these other venues was the Stalin-dominated Secretariat, where many routine (and sometimes important) questions were resolved and simply approved as a matter of course in the Politburo's name. More important as a decision-making center were the informal meetings held mainly in Stalin's office, supplemented by similar gatherings at his dacha, at ceremonial events, or in other people's offices.¹⁹ The meetings in his office appear to have

¹⁸ For figures, see Gill (2018), p. 108.

¹⁹ For details, see Gill (2018), pp. 110–111. Information about meetings in Stalin's office comes from A.V. Korotkov, A.D. Chernev & A.A. Chernobaev (eds.), *Na prieme u stalina. Tetradi (zhurnaly) zapisei lits, prinyatykh I.V. Stalinyam (1924-1953gg)* (Moscow: Novyi khronograf, 2008). Also see Stephen Wheatcroft, "From Team-Stalin to Degenerate Tyranny," in E.A. Rees (ed.), *The Nature of Stalin's Dictatorship: The Politburo 1924–1953* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 79–107.

been the major focus of top-level decision making, lasting on average for the equivalent of more than a full working day each week during this period.

The meetings in Stalin's office are of central importance for our understanding of the dynamics of oligarch politics during this period. Unlike the Politburo, which had a fixed membership (although many more people than just Politburo members attended sessions), these meetings were much smaller and appear to have been attended by invitation. There were some constants—Molotov, Kaganovich, and Ordzhonikidze were there on most occasions—but generally people seem to have attended when the areas for which they were responsible were to be discussed. Thus, the discussion of important issues shifted into an ad hoc if apparently highly regularized body, and one where the other oligarchs had no automatic right of attendance, as Politburo members had in the Politburo. This development is a validation of the claims made in the early 1930s that informal gatherings of some of the oligarchs were held to decide issues before formal meetings of the Politburo.²⁰ Stalin continued to be involved, albeit more haphazardly, when he was not away from Moscow on holidays, which he was for at least two months every year during this period.²¹ While away, Stalin was kept in the loop of what was happening in Moscow through letters and, after the installation of a direct telephone line in the early 1930s, the telephone.²²

When Stalin was away, the oligarchy continued to function. Meetings continued to be held and decisions were made, although on some occasions decisions were shelved until Stalin could voice his views, and on others decisions already adopted were overturned as a result of his intervention. However, the oligarchs do not appear to have been constrained against expressing their views before Stalin had made his view known—the

²⁰ For example, see O.V. Khlevnyuk, A.V. Kvashonkin, L.P. Kosheleva & L.A. Rogovaya, *Stalinskoye politbyuro v 30-e gody. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 1995), pp. 99–100 and L.P. Kosheleva, L.A. Rogovaya & O.V. Khlevnyuk (eds.), *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politbyuro TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b) 1923-38gg. Tom 3, 1928-38gg* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007), p. 178.

²¹ Wheatcroft (2004), p. 92.

²² For correspondence, see O.V. Khlevnyuk, R.U. Devis, L.P. Kosheleva, E.A. Ris & L.A. Rogovaya (eds.), *Stalin i Kaganovich. Perepiska, 1931-1936gg* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001) and Lars T. Lih, Oleg V. Naumov & Oleg V. Khlevniuk (eds.), *Stalin's Letters to Molotov* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). The initial telephone could not take conference calls, thereby preventing a multi-person discussion from taking place.

practice of Stalin speaking last in Politburo meetings made their statement of views virtually mandatory—but once he had outlined his opinion, they generally fell into line.

But everything could not wait on Stalin's opinion. If Stalin's assent had been required before every decision, government would have ground to a stop. The other oligarchs met both in small groups and as a whole and discussed issues. Frequently they differed. Although there was agreement on the general course of development, there were frequent disagreements about aspects of policy, especially budget priorities and resource allocation.²³ These differences often reflected the bureaucratic positions they held in the state or party machine, with the bureaucratic structures they headed having their own institutional interests that they sought to represent. Such disagreements could be quite vigorous, and on at least one occasion Stalin expressed his concern that they might lead to divisions within the "ruling group,"²⁴ but he does not appear to have always become involved in their resolution. There was thus a politics among the oligarchs in which Stalin was often uninvolved, despite attempts on occasions to recruit him onto one or other side of the debate. But this politics was not a continual struggle for power either to displace Stalin or to place limits upon him. It was a battle among the oligarchs over bureaucratic turf and oligarch position, not ultimate power.

Political life was not without rules. Policy disagreement remained acceptable, although the oligarchs would give way to Stalin when he insisted. Political setbacks did not inevitably mean sacking or worse, and the top leadership remained quite stable during this period. The oligarchs appear not to have been afraid of Stalin nor felt threatened by him; many had known him personally for many years and they were aware of his foibles and frailties. They were broadly united, acting collectively and cooperatively to govern in such a way as to achieve regime ends while not upsetting Stalin. Even as power slipped from the Politburo to the meetings in Stalin's office, the increasingly regularized nature of the latter gave structure to oligarch political life. Rather than a war of all against all in the absence of rules, this was a generally united oligarchy that sought to cooperate in order the better to rule.

²³ Gill (2018), pp. 106–107.

²⁴ Khlevnyuk, Devis, Kosheleva, Ris & Rogovaya (2001), pp. 50–51.

During the period of Mao's predominance in China, there was substantial oligarch stability. Of the thirteen people elected to the Politburo in 1945, eleven were still there at the beginning of 1966, and one of the two who had not made it through had died (Ren Bishi, in October 1950); of the twenty-three elected in 1956, nineteen (including the eleven from 1945) were still there in 1966, and two of those who did not survive had died (Lin Boqu in May 1960 and Luo Ronghuan in December 1963). Of course this was to change fundamentally during 1966, but up until that time, the level of stability is remarkable and is consistent with an absence of the sort of dog-eat-dog conflict that has been attributed to authoritarian regimes.

Mao's position of primacy did not mean lack of policy discussion. A number of factors contributed to this. One was that, unlike in the Soviet Union where the emergence of Stalin as the predominant leader accompanied the expulsion from the oligarchy of all of those Old Bolsheviks whose status would have rivaled or exceeded his own, in China the Communist gaining of power was spearheaded by a cohort of veteran revolutionaries, many of whose revolutionary standing was comparable to that of Mao. These were people who, like Mao, had suffered for their commitment to the cause and had standing in the movement; many were possessed of expansive egos. Even though during the 1950s Mao's colleagues may have "consistently regarded him as the ultimate authority,"²⁵ able to intervene whenever he liked, they were not prevented from engaging in policy debate themselves and advancing their views regardless of his. Mao accepted this, drawing the line when he believed that criticism and the expression of views was challenging his position (as opposed to his views). This was the case in the two major outbreaks of factional conflict during the 1950s, the Gao Gang-Rao Shushi affair of 1953–54 (although this was seen as less directed at Mao than at undermining the established system with Mao at its head), and Peng Dehuai in 1959.²⁶ In the 1950s, policy discussion was acceptable while anything that could look like an attack on Mao's position was not.

²⁵ Frederick C. Teiwes, "Chinese Politics 1949–65. A Changing Mao," in Frederick C. Teiwes, *Leadership, Legitimacy and Conflict in China: From a Charismatic Mao to the Politics of Succession* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1984), p. 24.

²⁶ Both cases have been subject to different interpretations, but I am following that of Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics at Mao's Court: Gao Gang and Party Factionalism in the Early 1950s* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1990) and Frederick C. Teiwes & Warren Sun, *China's Road to Disaster: Mao, Central Politicians, and Provincial Leaders in the Unfolding of the Great Leap Forward 1955–*

Policy discussion was also encouraged by the fluidity of Chinese institutional arrangements. During this period, there was only one Congress and the CC did not meet on a frequent basis, on average less than once per annum. The Politburo and after 1956 its Standing Committee do seem to have met more regularly (figures are not available), but one feature of the Chinese system is the frequent use of other fora for policy discussion. Gatherings such as “central work conferences,” the summer gatherings of leaders at summer resorts (usually Beidaihe), ad hoc conferences, and “enlarged” sessions of the Politburo or Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) were common types of gatherings which usually brought together a wider range of both central and provincial leaders than the oligarchy to discuss contemporary issues. In addition, when Mao was out of Beijing, which he was frequently, he often convened ad hoc meetings of regional officials to discuss issues. This pattern of irregular meetings drew a wider range of figures into the policy debate than occurred in the USSR or that would have been likely had the formal organs been the only sites for such discussion. It also opened the oligarchy up to policy influence from below.

Another thing contributing to the prevalence of policy discussion was that initially Mao only took an active interest in those areas of policy making where he claimed to be competent, principally ideology and the broad aims of the revolution, agriculture, and foreign and defense policy. Until 1958, when he became involved in the economy with disastrous consequences, Mao exercised only overall supervision of economic policy. Certainly at all times, given his position of primacy (despite the removal of the reference to his “thought” in the new party Constitution adopted in 1956), Mao’s lack of opposition to a policy was essential for that policy to go ahead. Given his effective veto power, one problem for the other oligarchs was that Mao was not always clear about his policy preferences or directions, and he frequently changed his mind, meaning that there was always an element of uncertainty in the minds of the other oligarchs. Nevertheless the

1959 (Armonk; M.E. Sharpe Inc., 1999), pp. 202–212. For a different view, see Avery Goldstein, *From Bandwagon to Balance-of-Power Politics: Structural Constraints and Politics in China, 1949–1978* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), Part II, and (on Peng) Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: 2. The Great Leap Forward 1958–1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

oligarchs did not fear Mao, and they got on with their own jobs in the governing of the country.

Mao's position changed in the late 1950s to early 1960s. The failure of the Great Leap Forward tarnished Mao's economic credentials, and in 1959 he moved from the "first line" of leadership to the "second line". However, this shift was not a result of the failure of the Leap but had been under consideration for some time.²⁷ What it meant was that Mao would leave the direct policy making to the other oligarchs while he exercised general oversight and concentrated on the future of the Chinese revolution, including the relationship with the Soviet Union. From January 1958, Mao stopped attending Politburo meetings.²⁸ The six years following Mao's withdrawal to the second line saw the growth of dissatisfaction on the part both of Mao and of the other oligarchs. Even though the other oligarchs aimed to come up with collective decisions to present to him for approval, regularly checked their decisions with him, and sought his signature on documents (including when he was away from Beijing)—and no one sought to challenge his authority—he became dissatisfied with their performance. He believed that they were not only trying to put things over him, but that the course they were following was destined to lead to the corruption of the revolution. He felt that he was becoming isolated, cut off and ignored. In turn, the other oligarchs felt frustrated at what they may have seen as Mao's carping and at the contradictory signals he was sending; he seemed to want both overall supervision as well as day-to-day control, but he could not have both and seemingly could not decide which. The result was the radicalization of policy leading into the Cultural Revolution, during which Mao achieved a dominant leadership position.

Thus in the period of Mao's predominance, he remained unchallenged even while his policy preferences did at times meet with significant resistance, albeit sometimes in veiled form. Policy discussion was not kept within the bounds of the oligarchy, but instead wider sections of the elite (including the military) were mobilized into it. But even given the wider range of people who could participate in such debate, the prospect of Mao being

²⁷ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: 1. Contradictions Among the People 1956–1957* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 152–156 and Teiwes (1990), p. 32.

²⁸ Kenneth Lieberthal, "The Great Leap Forward and the Split in the Yan'an Leadership 1958–1965," in MacFarquhar (2011), p. 122.

defeated and removed was remote, both because of his standing in the party and because of his charismatic appeal to those outside the oligarchy. The other oligarchs seem to have interpreted the situation in this way. They were operating within a general consensus about both the course of socialist development and the rules of the political game, such that policy differences were not (for the most part) seen as a battle to the death but a search for policy agreement. This too seemed to be Mao's position. When that consensus finally shattered in 1966, it was broken not by members of the oligarchy in self-defense, but by the leader in order to attack them.

THE DOMINANT LEADER

The periods in which Stalin and Mao were dominant leaders were associated with large-scale loss of position and often of life among the political elite of both countries. How did this affect the oligarchs? In the Soviet Union, of the fifteen members of the Politburo elected in 1934, five were re-elected in 1952 just before Stalin's death, constituting a nucleus of his long-existing colleagues (Molotov, Kaganovich, Mikoyan, and Voroshilov; Stalin was the fifth). Of the other ten, two died from natural causes (Kuibyshev and Kalinin) and one by suicide (Ordzhonikidze, following an argument with Stalin), Kirov was assassinated in December 1934, and Andreev was dropped from the Politburo in October 1952; the other five (or 33 percent of the 1934 Politburo) were repressed in the Great Terror (Petrovsky was demoted, the other four were arrested and shot).²⁹ Following the Terror, the level of continuity was much higher; of the eleven elected at the XVIII Congress in 1939, only three were not re-elected in 1952, and two of those died from natural causes (Kalinin and Zhdanov; Andreev was the third). Of the five who joined the Politburo between 1939 and 1952, three were re-elected in 1952, Voznesensky was arrested, and Shcherbakov died from natural causes.

The situation in China is more complex because over the long term a number of people who were purged in the Cultural Revolution (like Deng Xiaoping) came back into power after its end. However, the relevant period here is 1966 until Mao's death in September 1976. Of the twenty-three people elected to the Politburo in 1956, nine were purged in 1966. The Politburo ceased to function from March 1967 until April 1969. Of the

²⁹ Two of those added during the Great Terror, Eikhe and Yezhov, were also arrested and shot.

twenty-five people elected in 1969, fifteen were still there at the beginning of 1976; of the ten who were not re-elected, three died (Ye Qun in September 1971, Xie Fuzhi in March 1971, and Lin Biao in September 1971; Lin's death was linked to factional conflict, the others were from natural causes). Of the twenty-three who were elected in 1956, five (Mao, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Liu Bocheng, and Deng Xiaoping) were still there at the beginning of 1976 (although Deng had been purged and brought back and then dismissed again in April 1976). So in both cases, the oligarchy suffered significant casualties arising from political causes during the period of dominant leadership. It was during this period, particularly in the Soviet Union in the mid to late 1930s and late 1940s and in China during the height of the Cultural Revolution in 1966–69, when political casualties were much higher than they had been before, that one would expect the strongest case supporting the established view about uncertainty, vulnerability, and conflict within the oligarchy could be made. But is this image accurate even for these periods?

The period of Stalin's dominant leadership in the Soviet Union (1934–53) may be seen in terms of three sub-periods: 1934 until the outbreak of the war in 1941, the war, 1941–45, and the post-war period, 1945–53. Although these three sub-periods were quite different in character—the first was dominated by the Terror, the second by the existential threat posed by the war, and the third by national rebuilding and renewed elite uncertainty—there were also commonalities that extended across all three. One was the continued presence among the oligarchs of a small group who had been associated with Stalin personally from the time of the revolution or the early 1920s. These were Kaganovich, Mikoyan, Molotov, and Voroshilov. Although other oligarchs became close to Stalin at different times (especially Beria and Malenkov), they did not share the commonality of experience of these oligarchs in the regime's struggle for survival in the 1920s to early 1930s. The personal association of this older group was strongly based and included friendship relations;³⁰ Stalin relied particularly heavily on Kaganovich and Molotov in the 1930s, especially while he was away from Moscow. These figures were not always among Stalin's favorites—both Kaganovich and Voroshilov fell out of favor in the early 1940s, Mikoyan and Molotov late in the 1940s—but they were always loyal, and

³⁰ For a study of personal friendship among the oligarchs, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015).

Stalin never seems to have had any doubts about that loyalty. The most abject illustration of this is the way that Molotov continued to function as part of the oligarchy even after his wife had been arrested in 1949. While there is no evidence that this group was more loyal to Stalin than the other, younger, members of the leadership, their presence gave to the group a stability it would otherwise have lacked.

Nevertheless, prior to and after the war there was a sense of vulnerability and threat among the oligarchs. As the Terror unrolled before the war, the arrest and execution of members of the Politburo Chubar, Kosior, Rudzutak, Postyshev, Yezhov, and Eikhe made clear that the Terror could extend its tentacles into the oligarchy itself. Furthermore, this was the first time that loss of life was accepted as a general response to perceived failings on the part of the oligarchs. Although the level of attrition was lower among Politburo members than the CC,³¹ it is unclear whether they would have been aware of this, and in any case it would have been small comfort in the face of the disappearance of some of their immediate colleagues. Similarly in the post-war period, a series of campaigns was unleashed that criticized various “enemies,” which threatened to embrace some of the oligarchs, and did actually lead to the purge of Politburo member Voznesensky in 1949. In addition, Stalin came out openly in criticism of some oligarchs, including Molotov, Mikoyan, Malenkov, Beria, Khrushchev, and Bulganin, and although none was killed, Molotov, Mikoyan, and Khrushchev all lost official positions. And in 1949, Molotov’s wife was arrested and sent into exile. This sense of vulnerability is captured by the comments attributed to Bulganin: “It has happened sometimes that you go to Stalin at his invitation as a friend. And you sit with Stalin but you do not know where you will be sent next: to home or to prison.”³² Even allowing for possible poetic license in Bulganin’s attributed remarks, it seems clear that there were real reasons for feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability, especially in 1934–41 and 1945–53.

The increased uncertainty was paralleled by the continuing erosion of the formal institutions of the system. The party Congress met formally on only two occasions (1939

³¹ For the argument, see T.H. Rigby, “Was Stalin a Disloyal Patron?” *Soviet Studies* XXXVIII, 3, 1986, pp. 311–324.

³² Cited in “O kul’te lichnosti i ego posledstviyakh. Doklad Pervogo sekretarya TsK KPSS tov. Khrushcheva N.S. XX s’ezdu Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soyuza,” 25 February 1956, *Izvestiya TsK KPSS* 3, 1989, p. 163.

and 1952, although there was also a conference in 1941); the CC met irregularly, and although sometimes-important measures were adopted, neither body was effective as a decision-making organ. The politics of the oligarchy remained insulated from that of the elite more broadly. Within the oligarchy, the Politburo also did not function as an effective organ throughout this period. The greatest number of meetings held in any one year over this whole period was sixteen in 1935, and in eight years it did not meet at all.³³ Although in the mid-1930s many decisions were made by circulation (and therefore involved Politburo members), from 1937 on far more were being made in the Orgburo (Organizational Bureau) and Secretariat (both run by Stalin's assistants) in the Politburo's name. During the war years, the Politburo did not meet at all, with authority formally vested in a new body called the State Defense Committee, but in fact this rarely met in official session. Although decisions were issued in its name, they emanated from unofficial gatherings of leaders.

The main focus of collective oligarch decision making was these unofficial gatherings. As noted above, such meetings in Stalin's office had been important during the period of his predominant leadership, and they became even more so from the mid-1930s on. The record does not enable us to tell how many such meetings were held, but we can see from their duration that they took up a significant part of the working week, especially from 1937 to 1943.³⁴ The meetings had become regularized, with a shifting cast of participants depending upon what was to be discussed, but also with a core of common attendees on most occasions.³⁵ Records appear to have been kept by the party's secretarial apparatus, staffed chiefly by Stalin's personal assistants. We have no real evidence of how the meetings were conducted, but Mikoyan has discussed their nature during the war.³⁶ Meetings were usually held late in the day or in the evening, and everyone had the complete freedom to express and defend their views. Stalin did not object, but considered such expression of views to be aimed at advising him and helping him to reach the best

³³ For figures see Gill (2018), pp. 116, 127 & 130.

³⁴ The figures are in Gill (2018), pp. 117, 128 & 129.

³⁵ On the most common attenders, see Gill (2018), pp. 118, 127 & 133.

³⁶ Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan, *Tak bylo. Razmyshleniya o minuvshem* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2014), pp. 501–502. The view expressed by Mikoyan was confirmed by other participants in some of these meetings, like Georgy Zhukov. See Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), pp. 317–318.

decision, and he was in most cases understanding, judicious, and tolerant, even when he disagreed with the views offered. He often changed his view as a result of the advice and most of the time worked according to the facts; he was not capricious (at least until 1944) nor did he enforce his own beliefs where the facts contradicted them. According to Mikoyan, there was real collegiality and unity in the leadership, and Stalin generally had faith in his colleagues. While it may be that this picture of a collegial process was a function of the pressure stemming from the existential nature of the war and therefore was not typical of such gatherings before and after that conflict, no evidence has been found to suggest that this was the case. The failure of people like Mikoyan to remark on the unusualness of a meeting being conducted in this way is perhaps the best evidence we have that this was normal.

As Mikoyan notes, Stalin became more capricious and arbitrary from around 1944, when it was clear that the existential threat had passed and that it would be only a matter of time before the Nazis were defeated. This change in Stalin's demeanor is also reflected in the renewal of the sense of threat surrounding the oligarchy. But this was also the period when Stalin renewed the practice that he had followed before 1937 of taking extended holidays from Moscow. After 1945, he spent around three to five months each year away from the capital on holiday.³⁷ During this time he continued to follow what was happening in the oligarchy, with his increasing paranoia evident in the erosion of trust experienced by such long-time stalwarts as Molotov and Mikoyan. In his absence, the oligarchy continued to function, meeting regularly to discuss issues and arrive at decisions, many of which were formally conveyed to Stalin for his approval.³⁸ But similarly, many issues were not thus referred, and while on occasion this could induce a Stalinist objection and a back down by the oligarchs, there were many issues that Stalin did not review and were simply adopted as resolved in his absence.³⁹ Stalin was more distanced from decision-making the older he got.

³⁷ For figures, see Wheatcroft (2004), p. 92.

³⁸ On them acting as a collective body, see Oleg Khlevniuk, *Master of the House. Stalin and His Inner Circle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 260. Also Yoram Gorlizki & Oleg Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945–1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 105–108.

³⁹ On Stalin not reading the papers sent to him for review, see F. Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym. Iz dnevnika F. Chueva* (Moscow: Terra, 1991), pp. 258–259.

In surveying the period of Stalin's dominant leadership, it is clear that he was most directly and personally involved prior to and during the war, and his role after the war became much more one of (occasional) oversight. His position was such that he could resolve whatever issues he chose and override the views of the other oligarchs if he felt like it. However on most occasions, he seems to have been willing to operate through a collective arrangement whereby he and his chosen colleagues met in a small group to resolve issues. These groups are what have been called at various times quintets, sextets, or septets,⁴⁰ and although they had no formal or official standing, they had become regularized and routinized through the institution of meeting in Stalin's office. It is possible that these people acted only as "yes men" as the accepted wisdom of authoritarian leadership suggests, but this is unlikely. We know that on some issues, some of the oligarchs opposed Stalin's preferred position and in doing so were rewarded with his criticism. Some of the oligarchs have stated that they and others stood up to Stalin when they disagreed with his view,⁴¹ and when Molotov and Mikoyan were in Stalin's disfavor in the late 1940s, the other oligarchs facilitated their continued involvement in oligarch affairs despite Stalin's irritation.⁴² Both when Stalin was present and when he was absent, the oligarchs participated in the collective life of the oligarchy and on many occasions at least some of them were their own men. When Stalin presented his personal view, generally the oligarchs fell in behind it, although on occasion they did argue with him (for example, Khrushchev and the agro-towns proposal in 1951), but given that Stalin's practice was often not to make his position clear at the outset, they were often in the position of having to commit themselves before knowing what the dictator thought. This modus operandi suited Stalin; it enabled him to find out what the others thought as well as providing a means to keep them off balance and increase their uncertainty.

In the face of such uncertainty, it would have been natural to shut up and await the message from Stalin before committing, but often this was not an option. Not only did Stalin structure the discussion in such a way as to make them commit before knowing his

⁴⁰ On the changing membership, see Gill (2018), ch. 4.

⁴¹ See Chuev (1991), pp. 297, 298 & 452–453 on Molotov; Mikoyan (2014), pp. 562–564 on Mikoyan; and Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, Volume 1. Commissar (1918–1945)* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 256 on Voroshilov, and on Khrushchev himself, *Volume 2. Reformer (1945–1964)*, pp. 44–45.

⁴² On this see Mikoyan (2014), pp. 625–626.

view, but the issues under review were often mediated through competition among the oligarchs themselves. There was always competition in terms both of personal careers and institutional bureaucratic interests. Individual oligarchs sought both to insinuate themselves into Stalin's favor and, especially in the post-war period, to position themselves for the coming succession. Both of these aims usually of necessity involved participation in debates about policy. So too did the second imperative, bureaucratic institutional competition. The individual oligarchs were in effect representatives of the bureaucratic hierarchies they headed, and they had to champion those hierarchies' interests in the policy debate. This means that regardless of Stalin's position, the oligarchs had to participate in a politics which involved struggling for personal supremacy and policy victory, reflected in the continual tensions and conflicts that existed among the oligarchs over this period.⁴³ But in contrast to the established wisdom, this did not focus on the leader, his position, or any threat he may have been seen to represent.

So during the period of Stalin's leadership dominance, he could resolve whatever he chose to resolve regardless of the views of the other oligarchs, who on most such occasions simply supported what he said. But they were forced to offer their own views and to participate in policy discussion, and despite residual worries about their vulnerability in case of Stalin's displeasure, they were not so intimidated as to be struck dumb. They did not challenge Stalin⁴⁴ but sought to operate within the constraints his dominance imposed. They continued to meet in a regular fashion, even if it was not in the formal organs, and decisions were recorded and implemented. This was not an oligarchy that operated without rules and in fear of a tyrant, but one that functioned on the basis of informal rules and understandings and operated in a regularized fashion.

In China, Mao's period of dominant rule was much shorter, from 1966 until his death in September 1976, and may be divided into two sub-periods: the Cultural Revolution proper from 1966 to 1969, and the stabilization from 1969 to 1976. Throughout Mao held two positions, Chairman of the party and Chairman of the Military Affairs Committee, but his authority stemmed from his charismatic appeal rather than official

⁴³ For some examples of this, see Gill (2018), pp. 139–140.

⁴⁴ Even if credence is given to Mikoyan's view that he thought Stalin expected them to arrest him when his colleagues went to him following the German invasion in June 1941. Mikoyan (2014), p. 422.

office. In the initial Cultural Revolution period, the formal oligarch party organs, the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee, effectively ceased to function and, as indicated above, many of the oligarchs were removed from office. The organizational hub of the Cultural Revolution was the newly-created Cultural Revolution Group (CRG), which comprised Mao's closest supporters and radical intellectuals associated with them; of the eight members of the CRG, only Chen Boda and Kang Sheng had been members of the Politburo and, prior to August 1966, they had both been only candidate members. This group, aided by Defense Minister Lin Biao, drove the Cultural Revolution from the center, although much of the impetus for developments stemmed from actors outside the oligarchy, initially the Red Guards and then the People's Liberation Army. The rules of oligarch politics that had applied under Mao's predominant leadership ceased to operate. While the remaining members of the Politburo, the "first line" of leadership (people like Zhou Enlai supported by veteran revolutionaries like Li Xiannian and Chen Yun) continued to try to operate as before—seeking to moderate policy, operate through their ministries, and protect their bureaucratic constituencies—they increasingly became sidelined.⁴⁵ Mao preferred the CRG and the radicalization of policy, which was ultimately to destroy the political structure that the party had built. By 1968 the effects of CRG policies were clear, and the emphasis now shifted towards the restoration of order. This process was strongly supported by the military.

The Ninth Congress in 1969 set about restoring more regularized structures of politics, including a new Constitution for the party, recognition of Mao's "Thought" as the party's "guide," and Lin Biao as his successor, and it elected new leading party organs: a new CC, with less than a third of its members having been members of the previous CC, and a new Politburo and Standing Committee. The profile of the military in the new organs was very high; some 45 percent of members of the CC came from the military, compared with 19 percent in 1956.⁴⁶ The restoration of a semblance of the formal institutional structure that had been destroyed in the Cultural Revolution needed to be accompanied by

⁴⁵ On the dynamics of politics in the Cultural Revolution, see Frank Dikotter, *The Cultural Revolution. A People's History 1962–1976* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016) and Roderick MacFarquhar & Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge [Mass]: The Belknap Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Harry Harding, "The Chinese State in Crisis 1966–1969," in MacFarquhar (2011), p. 227.

a restoration of the norms governing oligarch life, which had also been destroyed. During the Cultural Revolution the principle that comrades could openly criticize and express their views on issues until a decision was made—at which point total obedience was required—was destroyed, as all criticism and dissent was interpreted as opposition to Mao and the Cultural Revolution and was grounds for purge. And when disciplinary procedures were required, they were not implemented through the party's established machinery, but by public self-criticism sessions run by people who were often not even party members. Thus both the institutional context of oligarch politics and its insulation from the lower ranks were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution, and it was these that many of the surviving former oligarchs wished to re-create.

But elite politics was anything but stable following the Ninth Congress.⁴⁷ The members of the former CRG remained around the apex of politics, with Mao's wife Jiang Qing as their leader and seemingly providing a direct channel to the Chairman. The military remained strongly represented and had in Lin Biao Mao's designated successor. And there was also a significant presence of the veteran revolutionaries, represented by Zhou Enlai, Ye Jianying, and Li Xiannian. There was little policy agreement among these three groups, and during 1970 they maneuvered to improve their relative positions. This was done principally through the means that had been common before the Cultural Revolution—debate in the renewed party bodies and appeal to Mao. Much of this activity was directed against Lin (and Chen Boda), with Mao becoming involved in the criticism of Lin. The result was Lin's death under circumstances still under debate.⁴⁸ Lin's military followers, including in the Politburo, were now purged in the classic step in a factional conflict. The death of Lin, and the interpretation by the oligarchs of the flight that preceded his death as a treasonous act, could have cast doubt on Mao's judgement, given that Mao had chosen him as his successor, but there is no evidence that there was any mobilization among the oligarchs against Mao; indeed, the three veteran revolutionaries, Zhou Enlai, Ye

⁴⁷ MacFarquhar (2006), and Frederick C. Teiwes & Warren Sun, *The End of the Maoist Era: Chinese Politics During the Twilight of the Cultural Revolution, 1972–1976* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007).

⁴⁸ On Lin and his fall, see Roderick MacFarquhar, "The Succession to Mao and the End of Maoism," in MacFarquhar (2011), pp. 254–275; Frederick C. Teiwes & Warren Sun, *The Tragedy of Lin Biao: Riding the Tiger during the Cultural Revolution, 1966–1971* (Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing, 1996), ch. 4.

Jianying and Li Xiannian, who would seemingly have had most reason to resent Mao given that he destroyed the structure they had built, all remained intensely loyal to Mao. But Lin's seeming treachery appears to have poisoned Mao's mind, and he now became even more suspicious of his colleagues and remote from them. This was a worrying development in light of the recent predations of the Cultural Revolution.

In the face of a more suspicious Mao, who was becoming more difficult to read and interpret and increasingly arbitrary in his views and actions—and therefore potentially more dangerous in terms of both the continuing policy debate and individual oligarch survival—the oligarchs faced a problem. How could they cope with a dominant Chairman whose changeable disposition created a large measure of uncertainty, and whose basic strategy now seemed to be one of seeking to play off different groups against each other? This was a change from pre-Cultural Revolution times and made oligarch politics even more uncertain. Adding to the uncertainty was the injection into the equation of veteran revolutionaries vs. Cultural Revolution radicals a third group, the beneficiaries of the Cultural Revolution, represented most importantly by the man Mao was on his deathbed to name as his new successor, Hua Guofeng.⁴⁹ Through changes to the party's leading organs, including at the Tenth Congress in 1973, Mao sought to keep a rough balance of forces at the apex of the regime in the Politburo. In addition, he would come out and criticize leading figures (e.g., Zhou Enlai), promote people and then demote them (Deng Xiaoping), and generally play a spoiling role. It was very difficult for the oligarchs to generate clear rules of procedure or of the political game in this situation, but they did the best they could. By at least late 1973, the Politburo seems to have resumed a regular pattern of meetings. Mao did not attend, being represented initially by “the two ladies” (his assistants Wang Hairong and Tang Wensheng) and then by his nephew, Mao Yuanxin. Mao Zedong could still resolve whatever he wished, but his participation was both indirect and episodic. He had had congestive heart failure beginning in 1972; cataracts on his eyes prevented him from reading for the eighteen months prior to August 1975; and by late 1975 Parkinson's disease had rendered him substantially disabled. But he could still take decisive action, as shown by his appointment of Hua Guofeng to replace Zhou Enlai when he died in January 1976 and his sacking of Deng in April 1976.

⁴⁹ Teiwes & Sun (2007), ch. 6.

Within this context, the veteran revolutionaries and the Cultural Revolution beneficiaries sought to generate some certainty by fostering the regularity of formal party organs, while CRG members continued to try to use their perceived closeness to Mao⁵⁰ to advance their fortunes in this conflict at the apex of the party-state. The Politburo and its Standing Committee seem to have met on a regular basis and the restoration of the party's administrative structure at the center encouraged the development of bureaucratic procedures of administration. This favored those, especially among the veteran revolutionaries, who retained high status in the organs of the state, especially in the economic and planning spheres. Mao's authority remained personalized, but the oligarchs sought through the regularization of party procedures to create a buffer against the Chairman's arbitrariness and to sideline the CRG. The protection provided by bureaucratic procedure has been self evident in all bureaucratic structures, and they sought to recreate it at the apex of the Chinese system. We have no evidence that at any stage they sought to organize in order to challenge or replace Mao; instead they sought to work around him, accommodate him, and not upset him. The norms that emerged from this strategy involving the discussion of issues and the regularization of procedure were to become entrenched after Mao died and continue to structure party life into the new century.

CONCLUSION

In both the Soviet Union and China, the oligarchs worked on strategies to deal with a predominant and then dominant leader, and there were clear similarities in both cases. The fostering of a regularity of process not only gave oligarchs an element of certainty in their own working lives, but also provided them with a buffer (inadequate as it may have been) against intervention from above. At no time do all of the oligarchs appear to have been so frightened of the dictator that they were unable to carry out the functions they possessed as a result of their bureaucratic positions, and some of them were at times even prepared to go against the dictator. The dictator was not alone, confronted either by frightened and isolated oligarchs or wary oligarchs united in opposition to him. Rather he was confronted by a group with a nucleus of long-established comrades who supported him through thick

⁵⁰ Although it had been assumed that the CRG had a solid organisational base in the propaganda apparatus in the capital and the urban machine in Shanghai, both of these proved to be quite weak.

and thin and who were not likely to be able to be mobilized into an anti-leader coalition. Certainly the oligarchs were often disunited, differing over both policy and bureaucratic issues, but they were generally united by a broad consensus. And that consensus included recognition of the primacy of one individual who, at his most powerful, could simply overrule the other oligarchs. Nevertheless, this rule was not a war of all against all, but a collective and basically collegial operation of the sort that starkly contrasts with established views of how authoritarian regimes operate.