



Cooption and Repression in the Soviet Union

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Abstract

The Soviet ruling elite, the nomenklatura, used both cooption and political repression to encourage loyalty to the communist regime. Loyalty was critical both in defusing internal opposition to the rule of the nomenklatura and in either deterring or defeating foreign enemies of the Soviet Union. The cost of coopting people into the communist party was a decrease in the standard of living of members of the nomenklatura, whereas the cost of political repression was the danger that members of the nomenklatura would themselves be victimized. We assume that the nomenklatura determined the extent of cooption and the intensity of political repression by equating perceived marginal benefits and marginal costs.

We use this assumption to construct the following account of the historical evolution of the policies of cooption and political repression in the Soviet Union: Under Stalin's leadership the nomenklatura, after initially emphasizing a strategy of cooption, then experimented with political repression as a substitute for cooption, and finally, in response to the threats posed by German militarism and the onset of the Cold War, employed a combination of cooption and political repression. After Stalin was gone the nomenklatura, having learned the cost of repressive excesses, adopted a policy that combined more cooption with less intense political repression. The rapprochement between the United States and China, the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism, and the escalation of the cold war arms race resulted in the final episode of increased cooption.

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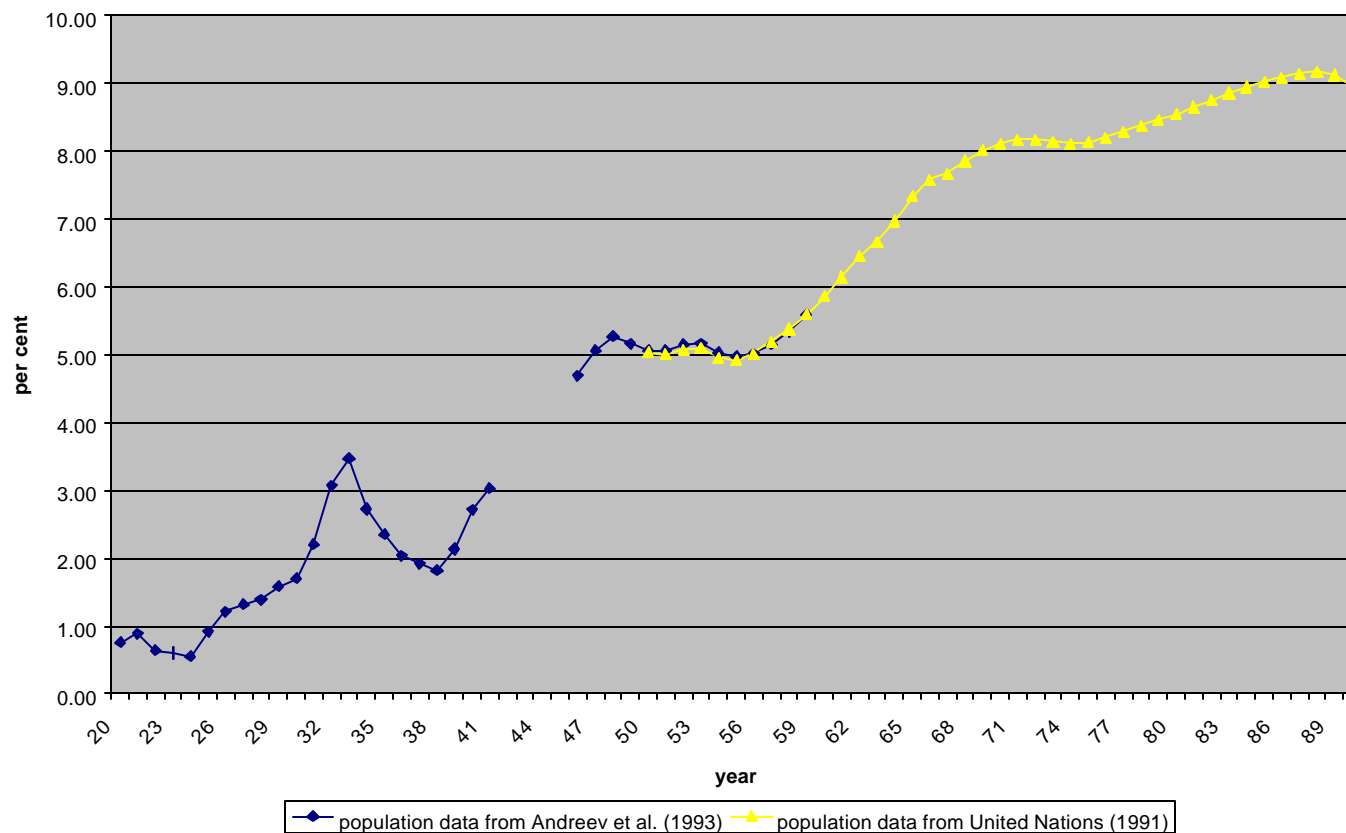
At the middle of the twentieth century conventional wisdom about the prospects for a liberal world order included the belief that fascist regimes were unlikely to survive for more than one generation, whereas communist regimes could survive forever. The prognosis for fascism was based on the observation that fascist regimes, whose *raison d'être* was to protect existing economic and social privileges from the onslaught of modernism, were inherently incapable of bringing growing numbers of educated people into the political and economic elite. Astute analysts correctly predicted that the exclusivity of fascist parties would make it difficult for them to coopt the generation that reached adulthood under fascism. As a result, ambitious members of this new generation would regard the existing reactionary political regime to be a barrier to their advancement and, as actually happened, this new generation would transform existing fascist regimes into liberal regimes as the mid-century fascist leaders passed from the scene.

The different prognosis for communism was based on the observation that communist parties, being themselves products of the frustrations of talented and ambitious people and being imbued with a revolutionary and egalitarian creed, were readily able to incorporate talented and ambitious people into their ranks. In fact, within a year or two after the Bolshevik victory in the Russian Civil War the communist party began to coopt the generation that reached adulthood under communism. From Lenin's death in 1924 to Stalin's death in 1953 membership in the communist party (CPSU) increased from only about one-half of one per cent of the adult population to about five per cent of the adult population.¹

The figure shows the evolution of membership in the CPSU, measured as a fraction of the adult population of the Soviet Union. Despite the trend of growth in membership, the figure

¹We always refer to the communist party as the CPSU. When the communist party seized power in the revolution of October 1917, it was calling itself the Russian Social Democratic Worker's Party (bolsheviks). In 1918 it changed its name to the All-Russian Communist Party (bolsheviks), in 1925 it changed its name to the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks), and in 1952 it changed its name to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

CPSU members as a fraction of the adult population, 1920-1990



Data sources:

For number of CPSU members annually from 1920 to 1983, “KPSS v Tsifrah”, (1983, pages 14-15).

For number of CPSU members annually from 1984 to 1990, Gill (1994, pages 15 and 101).

For adult (age 15 and older) population annually from 1920 to 1959 (excluding 1942-1945), Andreev, Darskii, and Kharkova (1993, pages 121-134).

For adult population quinquennially from 1950 to 1990, United Nations (1991, pages 360-361), intervening years by linear interpolation.

reveals that under Stalin's leadership the CPSU was not consistent in implementing a policy of cooption. Membership in the CPSU increased rapidly from 1924 to 1934, then decreased sharply until 1938, only to increase rapidly again during the war and immediate post-war years, before leveling off in the few years before and after Stalin's death. Interestingly, the peak of party membership in 1934 coincided with the first stage of the Great Purge, and the following period of decreasing party membership coincided with the intensification of Stalin's policy of ruthless political repression.

In the post-Stalin era the CPSU was more consistent in implementing a policy of cooption. After 1956, the year in which Kruschchev denounced Stalin's excessively repressive policies, party membership increased steadily until 1971, then leveled off for a few years, but began increasing again in the late 1970s. At its peak in 1989 membership in the CPSU reached more than nine percent of the adult population. It is likely that in 1989 more than a quarter of the people living in the Soviet Union were either party members themselves or part of the immediate family of a party member.²

Our analysis assumes that both the CPSU and the Soviet state, which in practice were indistinguishable, were instruments of the Soviet ruling elite (the nomenklatura). To simplify the modeling of policy choices we treat the nomenklatura as a unitary agent, abstracting, perhaps heroically, from factional interests and from the political process from which the collective actions of the nomenklatura emerged. We also abstract from relations between the nomenklatura and its agents, except that we explicitly address the actions of Stalin, an agent who was notoriously difficult to control and with whom the nomenklatura had a complex symbiotic relation.

The nomenklatura apparently used both cooption and political repression to encourage loyalty to the communist regime.³ Loyalty was critical both in defusing internal opposition

²The decline in party membership after 1989 is associated with the dismantling of the communist system, which caused party members to quit the CPSU because they saw the value of membership declining.

³Ronald Wintrobe (1998) bases his theoretical study of dictatorship on the same idea that a dictator can

to the rule of the nomenklatura and in either deterring or defeating foreign enemies of the Soviet Union. Our key assumption is that the nomenklatura determined the extent of cooption and the intensity of political repression by equating perceived marginal benefits and marginal costs. Using this assumption we suggest an explanation for why under Stalin's leadership the nomenklatura, after initially emphasizing a strategy of cooption, then apparently substituted political repression for cooption, and finally employed a combination of cooption and political repression. We also suggest an explanation for why after Stalin was gone the nomenklatura rejected the repressive excesses of Stalin and his henchmen and adopted a policy that combined more cooption with less intense political repression.⁴

Of course, one notable element of the mid-century conventional wisdom turned out not to be correct. Despite their ability to coopt successive generations of talented and ambitious people, existing communist regimes did not survive forever. But, the demise of the Soviet Union and its satellite communist regimes was consistent with belief that communist regimes would never be overthrown.

By the mid-1980s the nomenklatura apparently had realized that it had a better alternative to the communist system of resource allocation and income distribution, of which it had been the main beneficiary. Showing remarkable adaptability, the nomenklatura dismantled the communist system, in the process transformed itself from being a political elite to being

use both carrot and stick to secure his survival in power.

⁴Political repression under Stalin involved all of the paraphernalia of the totalitarian Soviet state, as described in what became in recent years a torrent of testimony and analysis. The forms of political repression aimed at individuals and small groups ranged from censorship and other means of thought control to torture, forced labor in the gulag, and execution. Repression on a larger scale included the contrived famine in Ukraine in the early 1930s and massive deportations in the 1940s. In the mid 1950s major changes in the Soviet criminal justice system, which included the abolition of the "administrative courts" and the placing of the security forces firmly under the control of the CPSU, changed fundamentally the nature of the repressive apparatus and decreased the level of repression it could produce. Gerard Berg (1985) and Michael Voslensky (1984) describe these changes.

a propertied economic elite, and emerged as the main beneficiary of the end of communism.⁵ The important observation is that the nomenklatura was successful until the end in defusing opposition to its rule.

Also, the Soviet Union was not conquered. The Soviet Union defeated Germany in the Second World War, and to the end the Soviet Union's massive armed forces, its nuclear arsenal, and, perhaps most importantly, the perceived loyalty of its people, remained effective deterrents against threats posed by its other foreign enemies.

1. The Nomenklatura and the Communist Party

Voslensky (1984) estimates from census data that in 1959 the nomenklatura consisted of about 750 thousand people, of whom about one-third constituted the political leadership (the apparatchiks) and the rest filled important positions in industry, research, education, and arts. Inclusive of immediate family members the nomenklatura in 1959 numbered about three million people, slightly more than one per cent of the population. Voslensky also estimates that these numbers changed little between 1959 and 1970.

Under the communist system of resource allocation and income distribution, although the nomenklatura received relatively modest money incomes, they enjoyed a variety of lavish perquisites, such as high quality apartments, access to special stores, and superior healthcare. The high standard of living of the nomenklatura mainly reflected these perquisites.

The membership of the CPSU consisted of the nomenklatura and a much larger number of rank-and-file party members. The nomenklatura coopted talented and ambitious people by inviting them to become rank-and-file party members. Given that the number of people in the nomenklatura was fairly constant, at least after the formative years of the Soviet

⁵For accounts of this process, see the article by Olga Kryshstanovskaya and Stephen White (1996), the books by Robert Service (1998) and Ronald Suny (1998), and the collection of essays edited by Anne de Tinguy (1997). These authors describe how the nomenklatura used its inherited political power to acquire assets on the cheap, to set up profitable joint enterprises with foreign companies, and to engage in lucrative currency speculations.

Union, growth in party membership mainly reflected growth in the number of rank-and-file party members. By 1980 there appears to have been about 20 times as many rank-and-file party members as the number of people in the nomenklatura.

Although rank-and-file party members had no effective political power and did not enjoy the same lavish standard of living as members of the nomenklatura, rank-and-file party members enjoyed advantages and privileges compared to people who were not party members, most importantly in possibilities for career advancement. According to Voslensky (1984, page 98), “While a party card is of course no guarantee of success, lack of it is a guarantee that you will not have a career of any kind.” Talented and ambitious young people in the Soviet Union viewed membership in the CPSU to be the key to a good life.⁶

2. The Benefits and Costs of Cooption and Political Repression

To account for policies of cooption and political repression, we assume that the nomenklatura perceived two threats to its ability to remain in power. We can presume that these threats were real, but the analysis requires only the perception of these threats.

One perceived threat was that foreign enemies either would conquer the Soviet Union or would topple its communist regime, with equally bad results for the nomenklatura. Our analysis treats the perceived threat posed by foreign enemies as an exogenous variable whose value changed several times in the history of the Soviet Union. Specifically, we assume that the perceived foreign threat intensified after Germany asserted itself as a military power in the late 1930s, remained intense with the onset of the Cold War, and, after moderating for a time, intensified again in the mid-1970s with the rapprochement between the United States

⁶As depicted by George Orwell in *1984*,

By the standards of the early twentieth century, even a member of the Inner Party lives an austere, laborious kind of life. Nevertheless, the few luxuries that he does enjoy — his large well-appointed flat, the better texture of his clothes, the better quality of his food and drink and tobacco, his two or three servants, his private motorcar or helicopter — set him in a different world from a member of the Outer Party, and the members of the Outer Party have a similar advantage in comparison with the submerged masses... (Orwell, 1949, quotation from 1977 edition, page 192)

and China, which were the two main postwar enemies of the Soviet Union, and yet again when the United States escalated the Cold War arms race beginning in 1979.

The other perceived threat was that a rival ruling elite either would depose the nomenklatura or would fragment the Soviet Union. From the end of the Russian Civil War the perceived intensity of this internal threat seems to have remained more or less constant, with the only apparently important exception being the emergence of divisive Islamic fundamentalism in the late 1970s.⁷

As indicated above loyalty to the communist regime was critical both in defusing internal opposition to the rule of the nomenklatura and in either deterring or defeating foreign enemies of the Soviet Union. The cooption of talented and ambitious people was a carrot that encouraged loyalty. People who became party members and enjoyed the advantages and privileges accorded to party members acquired a stake in the survival of the Soviet Union and its communist regime.⁸ Repression was a stick that encouraged loyalty. Repressive

⁷Several recent papers — for example, Yoram Barzel (2000), François Bourguignon and Thierry Verdier (1997), and James Robinson (1997) — argue that policies that foster economic development, like increases in education and the building of infrastructure, enhance the ability of rival elites to organize effective opposition to an incumbent ruling elite. This idea suggests that the economic development of the Soviet Union, the rate of which by any measure was rapid, even if decreasing in the last years, might have intensified the perceived threat from rival elites. We could easily extend our account of the evolution of cooption and repression to allow for this possibility.

⁸As Jerry Hough (1980) explains,

The Soviet government has thus far been skillful in the way it has tied the fate of many individuals in the country to the fate of the regime. By admitting such a broad range of the educated public into the party, it has provided full opportunities for upward social mobility for those who avoid dissidence, while giving everyone in the managerial class reason to wonder what the impact of an anti-Communist revolution would be on him or her personally. (Hough, 1980, page 33)

Hough claims that by the 1970s about half of all well-educated adult males were party members. Several recent papers have explored in other contexts the observation that elites defuse threats to their privileged

policies impeded the organization of disloyal groups, liquidated disloyal people, and instilled fear of punishment in potentially disloyal people.

The nomenklatura faced a nontrivial choice problem because both cooption and repression implied costs as well as benefits. In deciding on the extent of cooption and on the intensity of political repression the nomenklatura had to trade off the resulting increases in loyalty against these costs.

The cost of coopting people into the communist party was a decrease in the standard of living of members of the nomenklatura. The larger was the fraction of people who received the extra advantages and privileges of party members the smaller was the fraction of the income and wealth of the Soviet Union that the nomenklatura was able to appropriate for itself.

The cost of political repression was the danger that members of the nomenklatura would themselves be victimized. This danger arose for two reasons. First, the administration of political repression was necessarily imprecise. Because disloyalty and potential disloyalty are largely subjective characteristics, mistakes could easily be made in the rooting out of disloyal or potentially disloyal people. Second, people who administer a policy of political repression, as in the case of Stalin and Ezhov, the chief of Stalin's secret police, can abuse that power for their own purposes. This danger was realized most dramatically in the final stage of the Great Purge, the Ezhovschina of 1937 and 1938, when many members of the nomenklatura were themselves denounced and liquidated. For both of these reasons, it seems likely that the greater was the intensity of political repression the higher was the perceived probability that members of the nomenklatura would themselves be victimized.

3. The Nomenklatura and Stalin

Before analysing the nomenklatura's choice problem we should address the question of status by redistributing income or property to less privileged groups. See, for example, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (1996), Josef Falkinger (1999), and Herschel Grossman (1994, 1995).

whether our assumption that both the CPSU and the Soviet state were instruments of the nomenklatura is realistic for the period of Stalin's reign. To what extent did Stalin's actions reflect the policy choices of the nomenklatura as opposed to being the actions of an agent over whom the nomenklatura as principal had lost control?

T. H. Rigby (1968) suggests that, in addition to purging real and imagined political opponents, Stalin found denunciation and liquidation to be a cheap way to transfer authority for management of the economy and the society from old-timers in the nomenklatura to younger and more qualified technocrats. His account leads Rigby (1990) to refer to Stalin as a "disloyal patron" of the nomenklatura. But, as Voslensky explains, the nomenklatura had no problem with Stalinist repression until the escalating purges began to victimize members of the nomenklatura themselves.

The nomenklatura stated its objections to Stalin with its usual precision in political matters. It complained neither of the mass nature of the repression nor of its ferocity; all it objected to was *unjustified* repression. Apart from belatedly deploring the extermination of the old Bolsheviks, the only kind of repression that came into the unjust category was that to which the nomenklatura were subjected. (Voslensky, 1984, page 68, italics in the original)

Voslensky argues that Stalin and the nomenklatura had a complex symbiotic relation.

Stalin's protégés were his creatures. But the converse was also true; he was their creature, for they were the social base of his dictatorship, and they certainly hoped he would ensure them collective dictatorship over the country. In servilely carrying out his orders, they counted on the fact that these were given in their interests. Stalin could of course at any moment liquidate any one of them (as he often did), but in no circumstances could he liquidate the nomenklaturist class as a whole. He showed zealous concern for his protégés' interests and the reinforcement of their power, authority, and privileges. He was the creature of

his creatures, and he knew that they would scrupulously respect his wishes as long as he respected theirs. (Voslensky 1984, page 51)

In addition, Isaac Deutscher points out that Stalin vehemently defended the privileges enjoyed by the nomenklatura:

[Stalin] enigmatically warned the fourteenth [Party] congress: ‘We must not play with the phrase about equality. This is playing with fire.’ In later years he spoke against ‘levellers’ [people supporting a more egalitarian distribution of real incomes] with a rancour and venom which suggested that in doing so he defended the most sensitive and vulnerable facet of his policy. It was so sensitive because the highly paid and privileged managerial groups came to be the props of Stalin’s regime. (Deutscher 1998, page 113)

In any event it is hard to imagine how Stalin could have remained in power for almost thirty years, until he apparently died peacefully in his own bed, without at least the tacit support of most of the nomenklatura for most of his actions. Accordingly, we are comfortable with treating Stalin to be the nomenklatura’s agent, however imperfectly controlled. But, we also will argue that the nomenklatura had to learn from experience about the cost of intense political repression. The actions of Stalin and his henchmen taught the nomenklatura that the administration of political repression was necessarily imprecise and that people who administer a policy of political repression can abuse that power for their own purposes.

4. A Formal Model

To formalize our analysis of the nomenklatura’s choice problem we assume that the objective of the nomenklatura was to maximize the expected utility of its representative member. The nomenklatura chose the fraction of the population coopted as rank-and-file party members and the intensity of political repression to achieve this objective. We also assume that, although the representative member of the nomenklatura probably was not

exclusivity materialistic, and in particular probably valued political power for its own sake, the standard of living of the representative member of the nomenklatura was an important component of his utility.

The expected utility of the representative member of the nomenklatura was the product of three factors: first, the perceived probability that the nomenklatura would remain in power; second, the perceived probability that the representative member of the nomenklatura would not be a victim of political repression; third, the utility of the representative member of the nomenklatura, conditional on the nomenklatura's remaining in power.

Let P denote the perceived probability that the nomenklatura would remain in power. This probability is itself the product of the probability that the Soviet Union would not succumb to foreign enemies and the probability that the nomenklatura would avoid being deposed by a rival ruling elite. We summarize the determination of P in the relation

$$(1) \quad P = P(C, R; F, E),$$

where C denotes the fraction of the adult population that was coopted as rank-and-file party members, R denotes the intensity of political repression, F denotes the perceived intensity of the threat posed by foreign enemies, and E denotes the perceived intensity of the threat posed by rival elites. Using standard notation for partial derivatives, we assume that $P_C > 0$, $P_R > 0$, $P_F < 0$, and $P_E < 0$. Thus, equation (1) says that P was a decreasing function of E and F and an increasing function of C and R .

Let Q denote the perceived probability that the representative member of the nomenklatura would not be a victim of political repression. We summarize the determination of Q in the relation

$$(2) \quad Q = Q(R),$$

where we assume that $Q_R < 0$. Equation (2) says that Q was a decreasing function of R , the intensity of political repression.

Finally, let S , assumed for simplicity to be a scalar measure, denote the utility of the representative member of the nomenklatura, conditional on the nomenklatura's remaining in power. We summarize the determination of S in the relation

$$(3) \quad S = S(C),$$

where we assume that $S_C < 0$. Equation (3) says that S , in particular the component of S that reflected the standard of living of the representative member of the nomenklatura, was a decreasing function of C , the fraction of the adult population that was coopted as rank-and-file party members. For simplicity we assume that those invited to become rank-and-file party members received the minimum reward necessary to make party membership desirable. Also, without loss of generality, we treat the P , Q , and S functions as approximately linear over the relevant range.⁹

5. The Strategy of the Nomenklatura

At each point in time the nomenklatura wanted to choose C and R to maximize the expected utility of its representative member, as given by the product of P , Q , and S . In making these choices the nomenklatura faced the following trade-off: Increasing either

⁹Because the most talented and ambitious people would be the most able to organize alternative ruling elites, the nomenklatura presumably put the highest priority on coopting the most talented and ambitious people. Donald Barry and Carol Barner-Barry (1991) describe the communist party's strict admission standards and point out that evidence of leadership ability was an important qualification for party membership. Thus, once the most talented and ambitious people had been coopted, the marginal effect on the perceived threat posed by rival elites of adding more rank-and-file party members probably was decreasing.

Also, because those people who put the most value on the advantages and privileges of rank-and-file party members would be the first to accept offers of party membership, we can suppose that making party membership attractive to more and more people required a steady increase in the advantages and privileges offered to rank-and-file party members. Hence, the marginal cost to the nomenklatura of coopting more people into the communist party probably was increasing. Allowing for these nonlinearities would not affect the qualitative implications of our analysis.

the fraction of the adult population that was coopted as rank-and-file party members or the intensity of political repression decreased the perceived threats to the nomenklatura posed by foreign enemies and by rival elites. But, increasing the fraction of the adult population that was coopted as rank-and-file party members also decreased the standard of living and, hence, the utility of the representative member of the nomenklatura, conditional on the nomenklatura's remaining in power, and increasing the intensity of political repression increased the perceived probability that the representative member of the nomenklatura would himself be victimized.

Using equations (1), (2), and (3), the first-order conditions for an interior solution to the nomenklatura's choice problem were

$$(4) \quad P_C S + P S_C = 0$$

and

$$(5) \quad P_R Q + P Q_R = 0.$$

Given that both the product $P_C S_C$ and the product $P_R Q_R$ were negative, the second-order conditions for an interior maximum was unambiguously satisfied.

To understand equation (4) observe that $P_C Q S$ is the value of the perceived marginal benefit from adding a party member in increasing the perceived probability that the nomenklatura would remain in power, whereas $-P Q S_C$ is the value of the perceived marginal cost of adding a rank-and-file party member in decreasing the utility of the representative member of the nomenklatura, conditional on the nomenklatura's remaining in power. Equation (4) says that, in order to maximize the expected utility of its representative member, the nomenklatura wanted to increase the rank-and-file membership of the communist party until the perceived marginal benefit of cooption equalled the perceived marginal cost.

Note also that, because P_R was positive, the perceived marginal cost of adding a rank-and-file party member, relative to the perceived marginal benefit, was larger the more intense was political repression. This property means that cooption and repression were substitutes.

To understand equation (5) observe that $P_R Q_S$ is the value of the perceived marginal benefit from more intense political repression in increasing the perceived probability that the nomenklatura would remain in power, whereas $-P Q_R S$ is the value of the perceived marginal cost of more intense political repression in increasing the perceived probability that the representative member of the nomenklatura would himself be victimized. Equation (5) says that, in order to maximize the expected utility of its representative member, the nomenklatura wanted to increase the intensity of political repression until the perceived marginal benefit of political repression equalled the perceived marginal cost.

How did the chosen values of C and R , as implied by equations (4) and (5), depend on F and E ? Differentiating equations (4) and (5) and solving simultaneously the two resulting linear equations, we find that dC/dF , dC/dE , dR/dF , and dR/dE are all positive. This result says that a higher perceived intensity either of the threat posed by foreign enemies or of the threat posed by rival elites would cause the nomenklatura to choose both more cooption and more intense political repression. To understand this result observe that a higher perceived intensity of either of these threats would imply a smaller perceived probability that the nomenklatura would remain in power and, hence, a smaller perceived marginal cost of both cooption and political repression.

It is also of interest to ask how the chosen values of C and R , as implied by equations (4) and (5), depend on the effect of the intensity of political repression on the perceived probability that the representative member of the nomenklatura would himself be victimized. This effect is given by the negative parameter Q_R . Differentiating equations (4) and (5) and solving simultaneously the two resulting linear equations, we find that dC/dQ_R is negative and that dR/dQ_R is positive. This result says that a larger effect of the intensity of political repression on the perceived probability that the representative member of the nomenklatura would himself be victimized, as represented by a more negative value of Q_R , would cause the nomenklatura to choose more cooption and less intense political repression. To understand this result observe that a more negative value of Q_R would imply a larger

perceived marginal cost of political repression.

6. The Evolution of Cooption and Political Repression

With these theoretical results in hand, we can now attempt to explain the historical evolution of the policies of cooption and political repression. Referring back to the figure at the beginning of the paper we want to account for the following episodes:

1. The rapid increase in membership in the CPSU from 1924 to 1934.
2. The sharp decrease in membership in the CPSU from 1935 to 1938, coincident with the intensification of political repression.
3. Another rapid increase in membership in the CPSU from 1939 to 1948.
4. The leveling off in membership in the CPSU from 1949 to 1956.
5. The steady increase in membership in the CPSU along with a policy of less intense political repression from 1957 to 1971.
6. The leveling off in membership in the CPSU from 1972 to 1975.
7. The resumption of increases in membership in the CPSU beginning in 1976.

In attempting to explain the facts, which come to us as annual observations, we have to allow that learning from experience about the benefits and, especially, about the costs of cooption and repression was likely to have taken several years. We also have to allow that complete adjustment in party membership to the level at which the perceived marginal benefit and the perceived marginal cost of cooption were equalized could have taken a generation. Episodes of consecutive years of growth in party membership are likely to be the consequences of processes of learning and/or adjustment starting with party membership that was smaller than the extent of cooption implied by our model. In addition we have to

allow that the perceived intensity of the threat posed by foreign enemies apparently changed several times in the history of the Soviet Union.

We begin with the rapid increase in party membership from 1924 to 1934. After their victory in the Russian Civil War the Bolsheviks found themselves at the helm of a giant underdeveloped country, with hostile neighbors and population of uncertain loyalty.¹⁰ In this setting the nomenklatura seems to have recognized early on the desirability of extending membership in the CPSU beyond Lenin's core of "professional revolutionaries", who were in "the vanguard of the proletariat" in establishing the communist regime. In his account of the formative years of the Soviet Union Lewis Siegelbaum offers the following description of the strategy of the nomenklatura in increasing party membership in order to defuse internal opposition to the communist regime:

Seeking to overcome the breach between the party and its putative social base, the party elite coopted what it identified as the influential and potentially reliable strata of industrial workers. ... They [the coopted workers] thus could be defined as agents in two senses of the word: social activists whose infusion of proletarian blood could revivify the party, and faithful instruments who could structure the aspirations of their fellow but more "backward" workers into officially sanctioned channels. (Siegelbaum, 1992, page 183)

In the decade after Lenin's death the CPSU apparently increased its membership as rapidly as was feasible in order to achieve equality between the perceived marginal benefit and the perceived marginal cost of cooption.¹¹

¹⁰Pavel Palazchenko has pointed out to us that, when the Bolsheviks seized power, their party line included the expectation of an imminent world revolution, which would destroy the capitalist system and make the state redundant. Given this belief they initially saw no need to expand the communist party, especially because bringing new people into the party could decrease its cohesion. With a few years, however, it became clear that the world revolution was not going to happen.

¹¹There were at least two other motivations, in addition to defusing internal opposition, for increases in

The large increase in party membership associated with this initial implementation of the strategy of cooption seems to have educated the nomenklatura about the cost of cooption in decreasing the standard of living that the nomenklatura was able to appropriate for itself. Rigby (1968, page 213) points out that the first stage of the Great Purge in 1933 and 1934 was aimed at people who were “accused of exploiting their party membership for personal ends”, a clear indication that the nomenklatura had become concerned about the amount of the advantages and privileges accorded to rank-and-file party members. The intensification of political repression, coincident with the peak in party membership in 1934, is readily explicable as an attempt by the nomenklatura to substitute a cheaper policy of repression for the costly strategy of cooption.

In the late 1930s Germany asserted itself as a military power, and the perceived intensity of the foreign threat to the Soviet Union increased. As our model predicts, Stalin responded both by continuing intense political repression and by reemphasizing a strategy of cooption. The result was the rapid increase in membership in the CPSU beginning in 1939.

After 1943, when the Red Army’s victories in the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk turned the tide of the war in favor of the Soviet Union, the immediate threat from Germany diminished. But, increasing rivalry with the capitalist bloc, the subsequent onset of the Cold

party membership in this period. As Rigby points out, the years immediately following the Civil War also were a formative period for the nomenklatura itself and recently recruited rank-and-file party members were often promoted to positions of responsibility.

The restoration of industry [after the Civil War] highlighted and aggravated the shortage of communists in management and the economic administration. Meanwhile, the return to peaceful conditions was accompanied by a resurgence of spontaneous cultural and social activity which the party lacked the personnel to keep track of and control. (Rigby, 1968, page 118)

In addition, the nomenklatura itself was divided, and, as many historians have pointed out, the dominant faction led by the Stalin, Kamenev, and Zinoviev wanted malleable recruits for its struggle with Trotsky and his supporters. As E. H. Carr puts it in his comprehensive history of the Soviet Union,

The recruitment ... served the double purpose of countering an opposition whose main strength lay among the party intellectuals, and of providing a nucleus through which the proletariat could be influenced and won for party policies. (Carr, 1958, page 106)

War, and especially the development by the United States of atomic weapons, maintained the intensity of the perceived foreign threat to the Soviet Union. Hence, cooption remained a high priority in the immediate post-war years, and party membership continued to increase.

By 1949 party membership apparently had reached the level at which, given the intensity of political repression, the marginal benefit and the marginal cost of cooption were equalized. As a result, membership in the CPSU leveled off in the last years of Stalin's rule.

Stalin's death in 1953 was a watershed in the history of the Soviet Union. As we have already suggested, the Great Purge had been a painful learning experience for the nomenklatura. The actions of Stalin and his henchmen had revealed that the administration of political repression was necessarily imprecise and that people who administer a policy of political repression can abuse that power for their own purposes.

With Stalin gone the nomenklatura now had the opportunity to retake the powers that Stalin had been given, or that he had seized, and to reform the policies of cooption and political repression in light of what had been learned about the cost of political repression. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 signaled that the nomenklatura had decided on a new strategy involving less intense political repression and, by implication, more cooption of talented and ambitious people. To implement this strategy membership in the CPSU steadily increased from 1957 to 1971.

By 1971 party membership apparently had reached the higher level at which, given less intense political repression, the perceived marginal benefit and the perceived marginal cost of cooption were again equalized. Accordingly, membership in the CPSU again leveled off.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, however, several developments caused the nomenklatura to step up again its policy of cooption. First, with the gradual rapprochement between the United States and China, which were the two main enemies of the Soviet Union, the perceived foreign threat to the Soviet Union again intensified. Second, in the Asian republics divisive Islamic fundamentalism emerged as a perceived threat to the cohesion of the Soviet Union. Third, in 1979 the United States escalated the Cold War arms race, and the perceived

foreign threat to the Soviet Union intensified further.

Again, as the model predicts, the nomenklatura responded by increasing the cooption of talented and ambitious people. Also, as Ronald Hill and Peter Frank (1981) point out, the relative number of party members from non-Slavic nationalities, which had been underrepresented in the CPSU, increased in this period, as the Islamic threat increased the importance of coopting people from the Asian republics. The result was the final episode of growth in membership in the CPSU, which continued until the dismantling of the communist system.

7. Summary

We have attempted to explain the historical evolution of the policies of cooption and political repression in the Soviet Union. Our analysis assumed that both the CPSU and the Soviet state were instruments of a ruling elite, the nomenklatura, and that the objective of the nomenklatura was to maximize the utility of its representative member. This maximand was the product of three factors: first, the perceived probability that the nomenklatura would remain in power; second, the perceived probability that the representative member of the nomenklatura would not be victimized by political repression; third, the utility of the representative member of the nomenklatura, conditional on the nomenklatura's remaining in power. We also assumed that the standard of living of the representative member of the nomenklatura was an important component of his utility.

We assumed that the nomenklatura used both cooption and political repression to encourage loyalty to the communist regime. The nomenklatura coopted talented and ambitious people by making them party members. Loyalty was critical both in defusing internal opposition to the rule of the nomenklatura and in either deterring or defeating foreign enemies of the Soviet Union. In deciding on the extent of cooption and on the intensity of political repression the nomenklatura had to trade off the resulting increases in loyalty against the costs of cooption and political repression. We assumed that the cost of coopting people into the communist party was a decrease in the standard of living of members of the nomenklatura,

whereas the cost of political repression was the danger that members of the nomenklatura would themselves be victimized.

We also allowed that learning about the effects of cooption and repression was likely to have taken several years and that complete adjustment in the extent of cooption could have taken a generation. In addition, we took account of several changes in the perceived intensity of the threat posed by foreign enemies.

We can summarize our account as follows: Under Stalin's leadership the nomenklatura, after initially emphasizing a strategy of cooption, then experimented with political repression as a substitute for cooption, and finally, in response to the threats posed by German militarism and the onset of the Cold War, employed a combination of intense political repression and cooption. As a result membership in the CPSU increased rapidly, then decreased sharply, before increasing rapidly again. After Stalin was gone the nomenklatura, having learned the cost of Stalin's repressive excesses, adopted a policy that combined more cooption with less intense political repression. As a result, membership in the CPSU increased steadily, then leveled off, until the rapprochement between the United States and China, the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism, and the escalation of the cold war arms race resulted in yet more cooption and in the final episode of growth in party membership.

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