Probably a few days after the Tenth Party Congress ended, Stalin wrote a brief letter to Lenin. As one of the very few personal communications he apparently ever sent to Lenin, it demands interest.\textsuperscript{1} Nonetheless, there has been an almost total silence about this little letter in Western literature about Stalin and Lenin.\textsuperscript{2} Though not mined previously, this most important document contains extraordinarily rich veins of information about how Stalin reacted to Lenin’s introduction of the NEP.

Stalin began his note to “Comrade Lenin” by praising the nearly four-month old GOELRO plan for the electrification of Russia, which he claimed he had just had the chance to read thanks to an illness.\textsuperscript{3} “It’s an ill wind indeed,” he remarked chummily, “that doesn’t blow someone some good!” Stalin went on to say that he found the GOELRO plan “An excellent, well-compiled book. A masterly draft of a really \emph{comprehensive}\textsuperscript{4} and really state economic plan, \emph{without quotation marks}. The only Marxist attempt in our time to place the Soviet superstructure of economically backward Russia on a really practical technical and production basis, the only one possible under present conditions.” He then ridiculed a recent economic proposal by Trotsky and “the dozens of ‘comprehensive plans’ which to our shame appear from time to time in our press.” Lenin’s deputy in the Council of People’s Commissars, Alexei Rykov, also came under fire for criticizing the GOELRO plan. Stalin then recommended five actions to be taken immediately to implement the electrification plan. The last of these was to popularize the GOELRO plan in leading newspapers, “bearing in mind that there is \emph{only one} ‘comprehensive economic plan’—the Plan for Electrification, and that all other ‘plans’ are just idle talk, empty and harmful.” The note closed with a cordial, “Yours, Stalin.”\textsuperscript{5}

On its surface Stalin’s note may seem to be a transparent and clumsy attempt to drive a wedge between Lenin and others, principally Trotsky and Rykov, and to strengthen
his own relationship to Lenin, of whose enthusiasm for electrification at the Eighth Congress of Soviets the past December Stalin obviously was aware. This reading of the document seems plausible; indeed, it probably is how Stalin expected Lenin to read it. But before we accept it, there is one odd and suggestive bit of verbiage in Stalin's letter which needs to be explained.

The odd language is the prepositional phrase that concludes the characterization of the GOELRO plan in Stalin's opening paragraph: “A masterful draft of a really comprehensive and really state economic plan, without quotation marks.” To what do the words, “without quotation marks” refer? Why did Stalin emphasize them? What was his purpose?

By stressing that he had not borrowed words to express his opinion of the GOELRO plan, Stalin was underscoring the sincerity of his own words of appreciation for the plan. He achieved this effect by implying a contrast between himself and someone who had employed quoted words to characterize the plan and whose support for it, therefore, was of questionable sincerity. The emphasis Stalin placed on the words, “without quotation marks,” indicates that he meant to insinuate criticism of this unidentified person. Because it was wholly unnecessary—in view of Stalin’s numerous overt assertions of enthusiasm for the GOELRO plan—for him also to affirm his sincerity by the indirect means of implying an invidious comparison, there is further reason to think that the essential purpose of the words, “without quotation marks,” was to imply criticism. But to whom was Stalin alluding? And why, when he attacked Trotsky and Rykov by name, did he not name the target of his barbed insinuation?

The answer is that Stalin’s target was Lenin himself. In Pravda on February 22, Lenin had presented a new assessment of the GOELRO plan, withdrawing the enthusiastic endorsement of the plan that he had given three months earlier at the Eighth Congress of Soviets. Lenin did chastise some bureaucratic critics of the electrification plan, charging them with wanting to bury the project under red tape and study commissions. With
he reminded them that the Central Executive Committee had called for drafting a "'nationwide state economic plan on scientific lines and consistently implementing it.'” “Clear enough?” he chided, “A ‘nationwide state economic plan on scientific lines’—can anyone misunderstand these words in the decision of our highest authority?” But then, ignoring the very directive he quoted, Lenin himself backed away from implementing the plan and criticized partisans of prompt action for not recognizing the need first to resolve technical and other problems. The GOELRO plan, insisted Lenin, had to be “amplified, elaborated, corrected” and meshed with several short-range plans, all of which had problems of their own. A lack of administrative expertise also blocked progress. But the main obstacle, Lenin said, was the widespread infection of the bureaucracy with “‘communist' conceit,” that is, the attitude of Party bigwigs who were overly fond of issuing orders and arbitrarily exercising authority. More appreciation for the viewpoint of bourgeois specialists was needed, Lenin stressed; indeed, he said that this was a case where “the engineer’s path to communism” took precedence over “that of the underground propagandist.” Instead of slogans and orders, Lenin counseled, what was needed was thorough and technically expert study of the GOELRO plan. Lenin maintained this position even though he acknowledged that the Eighth Congress of Soviets, in approving the plan, had required giving it the “broadest popularization” and issuing a “series of orders and commands: what to buy, when, and from whom, what to start to build, what materials to assemble and deliver, and so forth.”7 Thus, though Lenin remained supportive of electrification in theory, as a practical matter he opposed implementing the GOELRO plan in the foreseeable future.

Because Lenin had not only quoted the Central Executive Committee’s endorsement of the GOELRO plan but also stressed that it could not be misunderstood, only to turn around and oppose implementing the very same Central Executive Committee decision, it seems clear that it was Lenin that Stalin was criticizing for insincerity. Given Lenin’s conduct, such a charge was wholly appropriate. His insistence on extensive
study of the plan when he himself pointed out that opponents of implementation would try to bury the plan under a pile of study commissions likewise indicates insincerity.

But was Stalin familiar with Lenin’s article of February 22? The simple and indisputable assumption that Stalin read Pravda suggests he was. Proof, moreover, is provided by several pointed references to Lenin’s February 22 Pravda article in Stalin’s letter. First, in his letter’s last paragraph Stalin states that “there is only one ‘comprehensive economic plan’—the ‘plan for electrification.’” The first words that Stalin quotes, “comprehensive economic plan,” allude to the title of Lenin’s article (“On the Comprehensive Economic Plan”). Second, the last of Stalin’s five recommendations for action—to popularize the GOELRO plan—concurs with the Central Executive Committee’s instructions and rebuts Lenin’s Pravda statement against issuing slogans to promote the electrification plan. (Pertinently, it also asserts the continuing importance of propagandists, such as Stalin himself, who Lenin would prefer take a back seat to bourgeois specialists.) Finally, Stalin’s fourth recommendation (that “without fail we must include in the planning commission live practical men who act on the principle—‘Report the fulfillment,’ ‘Fulfill on time,’ and so forth”) directly repudiates Lenin’s criticism of Soviet administrators who were overly fond of issuing orders; it also parodies Lenin’s list of the kind of orders he did not want given even though the Eighth Congress of Soviets called for them. These several allusions to Lenin’s article indicate that Stalin was familiar with and opposed to Lenin’s current, lukewarm views on the GOELRO plan.

It should hardly be surprising that Stalin was annoyed by Lenin’s position on the GOELRO plan. He was, after all, chronically annoyed by almost everything Lenin did. But it is surprising that Stalin went to the length of throwing his annoyance right in Lenin’s face. By rubbing Lenin’s nose in his own hypocrisy, Stalin was taking a considerable risk. To take such an extreme step, even in a heavily disguised way, he must have had a deeper cause than mere dissatisfaction with the Lenin’s shift on the GOELRO plan. Further
analysis of Stalin’s letter indicates what this cause was: Lenin’s abandonment of socialist construction in favor of reviving capitalism.

Consider that the electrification of Russia was intended to be the central and essential component of the effort to build a modern, socialist society, the means to establish rational state control over the entire national economy. Stalin’s characterizations of the plan show that he valued it for just these qualities, for precisely the reason that it was the means to achieve comprehensive and scientific state control over Russian economic life. We may reasonably hypothesize, therefore, that in Stalin’s letter the GOELRO plan is a metaphor for socialist construction. In voicing support for the GOELRO plan, then, Stalin was expressing his continuing commitment to socialist construction, and in criticizing an unnamed individual for insincerely supporting the electrification plan he was chastising Lenin for lacking the determination to build socialism.

This interpretation of Stalin’s letter is further indicated by Stalin’s statement that “there is only one ‘comprehensive economic plan’—the ‘plan for electrification.’” Logically, this implies rejection of all other economic plans. Stalin’s emphasis on the words, “only one,” indicates that he intended this implication, as does the fact that he repeats it in claiming that compared to the GOELRO project “all other ‘plans’ are just idle talk, empty and harmful.” His disdain for other economic projects is unmistakable also in his attack on “the dozens of ‘comprehensive plans’ which to our shame appear from time to time in our press,” which for good measure he calls “the childish prattle of preschoolers.” Because Stalin made these statements just after the Tenth Party Congress, following which there was in reality only one economic “plan”—the policy of reviving capitalism soon to be known as the NEP—the conclusion is inescapable that in attacking “all other plans” Stalin was actually denouncing Lenin’s policy of capitalist revival. The position Stalin took in his letter to Lenin is fully consistent with the position
he took in Baku in November 1920 and, indeed, with all of the criticism he voiced of Lenin’s thinking about domestic affairs since early 1920.

The original source of the phrase, “comprehensive economic plan,” used by both Lenin and Stalin, is a resolution by the Ninth Party Congress in April 1920 which called for a “comprehensive economic plan designed for the coming historical epoch.” This fact reinforces the conclusion that the true subject of Stalin’s letter is Lenin’s new policy. Stalin’s use of the phrase not only alludes to the title of Lenin’s Pravda article but implies a rebuke to Lenin for forgetting—even though he borrowed the words of the Ninth Party Congress’ resolution as well as those of the Central Executive Committee—that the Congress had specified development of a plan for a communist future, not a capitalist one. The GOELRO plan, which Lenin was shelving, was supposed to have been this plan. The capitalist restoration that Lenin was instituting certainly was not.

Of all Stalin’s criticisms of Lenin’s new course, the strongest comes at the end of his opening paragraph. The GOELRO plan, he wrote, is “The only Marxist attempt in our time to place the Soviet superstructure of economically backward Russia on a really practical technical and production basis, the only one possible under present conditions.” In the same way that Stalin’s assertion that “there is only one ‘comprehensive economic plan’” implies that Lenin’s plan was not the kind called for by the Ninth Party Congress, so too this exclusive characterization of the GOELRO plan as the “only Marxist” strategy for economic progress implies that Lenin’s new approach—and by extension, Lenin himself—was not Marxist. If this conclusion seems outrageous, when we consider that Lenin was violating the Party Program and resolutions of the Ninth Party Congress, the Eighth Congress of Soviets, and the Central Executive Committee, and especially that he was promoting measures that he himself admitted were demanded by the “petty-bourgeois counter-revolution,” it is not really a surprising finding at all.

In his letter to Lenin, Stalin relies heavily on logical implication to convey, and to conceal, his meaning. His use of elementary logic is especially evident in his
characterizations of the GOELRO proposal and of all other economic plans, which repeatedly and consistently assert that all other economic plans are bad. This serves as the first premise—and the only one Stalin needed to state—of an implied syllogism. The second premise of this basic tool of logic is the self-evident and pertinent truth that Lenin’s new policy is another economic plan. Though Stalin left the moral to be inferred, the conclusion of the syllogism follows inescapably: therefore, Lenin’s new policy is bad. By the emphasis he employed, Stalin pointed to the syllogistic intent of the key clause, “there is only one ‘comprehensive economic plan.’” Similarly, he used emphasis to indicate the Aesopic purpose of the words, “without quotation marks.” These repetitions of technique, together with his several allusions to Lenin’s Pravda article, constitute patterns of usage which demonstrate, as a single example might not, the Aesopic character of the letter.

In the months and years before March 1921, Stalin had frequently issued Aesopian criticisms of Lenin in speeches and in articles. Since he could have voiced his thoughts about GOELRO in a public forum, we need to ask why, then, did he decide to take the unusual and dangerous step of issuing another strong attack on Lenin in a letter to Lenin himself? Aesop-Stalin must have had some greater purpose than simply voicing his disguised dissent and disdain as he had done so often before in the public media. We need to dig deeper to discover this purpose.

In the letter to Lenin, Stalin overtly attacked two members of the Bolshevik hierarchy, Trotsky and Rykov. Trotsky’s economic thinking was deplored, and he was ridiculed as “A medieval artisan who imagines he is an Ibsen hero called ‘to save’ Russia by an ancient saga.” This odd passage may have been intended as a tactic to help conceal the true content of the letter: it suggested both that Stalin wrote the letter to attack Trotsky and that Stalin was indeed a strange and confused bumpkin—two impressions that would discourage Lenin from paying serious attention to the letter. In view of Stalin’s pose as Russia in his Baku speech in November 1920, however, it would appear that Stalin
was indeed serious in deriding Trotsky for supposedly thinking himself Russia's savior. That role Stalin claimed for himself. But was it really Trotsky who Stalin thought regarded himself as Russia’s savior? Lenin was a more likely candidate. It was Lenin, as the leader of Russian Communism, who would most immediately come to mind—especially to Stalin’s mind—as a pretender to the role of Russia’s savior. Moreover, Lenin is the object of all of Stalin’s other Aesopian texts. And it was precisely Lenin’s new policies which Stalin was attacking in his letter, though without ever mentioning them. It is important, too, that just days before, Stalin had used Chicherin as a surrogate for an attack on Lenin. We may conclude, then, that, just as with Chicherin, Stalin was using Trotsky as a vehicle for a disguised attack on Lenin himself. The conclusion that it was really Lenin who Stalin was branding as a false messiah is wholly consistent with the view of Lenin that Stalin had held for more than a decade.

Recognizing that Stalin was hurling charges at Lenin through Chicherin and Trotsky helps us to understand the purpose of Stalin’s attack on Rykov, Lenin’s deputy in chairing the Council of People's Commissars. In December 1920 at the Eighth Congress of Soviets Rykov took a position on the GOELRO plan which prefigured that which Lenin would take in Pravda two months later: though he paid lip service to the plan, he emphasized other, more urgent economic problems that he argued had prior claim on the country’s meager resources.11 Because Rykov and Lenin were essentially of one mind in assessing Russia’s economic situation, needs and priorities, any attack on Rykov for his stand on economic issues also would apply to Lenin. Thus when Stalin attacked “the philistine ‘realism’ (in fact, the Manilovism) of Rykov, who continues to ‘criticize’ the GOELRO and is immersed to his ears in routine,”12 he was actually attacking Lenin. The charge of Manilovism (Manilov is a character in Gogol’s Dead Souls who personifies fools with intellectual pretensions) flows smoothly from Stalin’s long-held view of Lenin. Lenin, moreover, was indeed up to his ears in paperwork, and he certainly had criticized the GOELRO plan, letting his concerns about social and economic realities prevail over his

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Communist enthusiasm. The shoe that the cobbler’s son put on Rykov, so to speak, fit Lenin perfectly.

This brings us to the most important purpose of Stalin’s letter: in labeling Rykov’s realism “philistine” he was also branding Lenin a “philistine.” In normal Bolshevik parlance, this was a serious charge to make: it was often made against Mensheviks and others who put mundane concerns ahead of Marxist principle. In view of Stalin’s long-standing belief that Lenin was a Menshevik in Bolshevik’s clothing, it was a fitting charge for him to make against Lenin. But when Stalin posed as David several days before, he invested the label “philistine” with far greater meaning. It was a sentence of death on V. I. Lenin.

Lest there be any doubt about the meaning of the insinuation that Lenin was a “philistine,” let us jump ahead to the time of Lenin’s death in January 1924. As we shall see, in the preceding several months Stalin openly attacked the NEP as the source of major evils in Russia, demanded that the Party be made once again into a “militant organization of the proletariat,” and called for raising “the red banner” and building socialism. On January 9, twelve days before Lenin’s death, Stalin stated matter-of-factly that “a small opposition group, which includes a couple of well-known names, holds a view contrary to that of the Party as a whole” about the NEP. He carefully avoided indicating on which side of the issue he stood, but he suggested that after the imminent Thirteenth Party Conference (January 16-18) the Party “will be able to contend even better with the task of directing the life of our vast country along the lines of rapid economic and cultural ascent already begun.” Having certified his desire to resume the “rapid ascent” toward communism of the early years, at the Conference Stalin raised “the punishing hand of the Party” against all deviationists. The foremost victim, Stalin signaled Aesopically, would be no one less than Lenin himself: “compared with his disciples,” Stalin told Conference delegates on January 18, “Ilyich stands out as a veritable Goliath.” What all
mistook as praise for Lenin as the giant among Bolsheviks had an entirely different but historically precise meaning for Stalin-David.

Three days later, on January 21, Lenin-Goliath fell dead.

* * *

From his earliest encounters with Lenin at Tammerfors and Stockholm in 1905/1906 to his irrevocable partings with Lenin in Moscow in 1921/1924, it had been a long road for Stalin but only a short step. Perhaps some humiliation or other personal affront he suffered at Lenin’s hands at Tammerfors had engendered in him an instant hatred of the Bolshevik chieftain. Certainly, Lenin’s unheroic conduct at Tammerfors had destroyed Stalin’s idealized image of “the mountain eagle,” while Lenin’s mistaken political positions there and at Stockholm in matters that Stalin regarded as issues of the most fundamental principle led Stalin to doubt, if not already to disbelieve, Lenin’s Bolshevism. Promptly after Stockholm Stalin voiced the secret desire that Lenin were dead. As Lenin continued year after year to violate what Stalin regarded as first principles, he confirmed and confirmed again his erstwhile disciple’s conclusion that he was not merely a bad Bolshevik, an unfit leader, but an opportunistic Menshevik in Bolshevik’s clothing. Stalin’s desire to be rid of Lenin solidified during these years, evidenced particularly by his various poses as the “old” Lenin and by taking the name “Stalin.” As Stalin saw it, Lenin’s erratic and cowardly leadership in 1917 nearly cost the Bolsheviks the revolution—leading the Georgian to covertly express his wish that Lenin be dispatched to “the archives.” Stalin’s contempt was deepened by Lenin’s conduct after the October Revolution, which he seemed to want to undo by “treasuring” bourgeois elements over the practical workers of the Party, by moving from warfare against the class enemy toward compromise with Mensheviks, peasants, merchants and imperialists, and
finally by beginning the restoration of capitalism in Socialist Russia. Stalin’s personal hostility toward Lenin, his ambition, and his belief that he was the rightful leader of Russian revolutionary socialism all doubtless played parts in Stalin’s decision to remove Lenin, but probably the decisive factor was Lenin’s own betrayal of socialist militancy.

It is clear that by the time of the Tenth Party Congress Stalin had concluded that Lenin had to be removed. But it seems quite likely that he had reached this decision almost a year earlier, by April 1920, when he delivered his double-barreled birthday blast at Lenin. All of the factors in Lenin’s thinking that provoked Stalin to action in 1921 were present in sufficient outline by March and April 1920. Stalin’s reference in 1938 back to Lenin’s address to the Water Transport Workers’ Union on March 15, 1920, as the moment when he decided that a purge of the Party was needed underscores the critical importance of that speech in deciding Stalin to remove Lenin. Moreover, Stalin’s remarks on the evening of Lenin’s fiftieth birthday suggest that he was planning to declare himself “David” and Lenin “Goliath” at that time.

There are only two occasions (other than in his March 1921 letter to Lenin and at the Thirteenth Party Conference in January 1924) when Stalin referred to Lenin as a “giant” or a “philistine.” Immediately after Lenin’s death Stalin recalled having expected him to be a “giant” [velikan] before he first met him at Tammerfors in 1905, only to discover that Lenin was “in no way, literally in no way, distinguishable from ordinary mortals."\(^{17}\) Of greater interest is that in introducing his recollections of Lenin on the evening of Lenin’s fiftieth birthday Stalin said that “I recall two occasions when Lenin, that giant [velikan] admitted that he had been in the wrong.”\(^{18}\) It seems probable that this characterization of Lenin on April 23, 1920, was intended to serve the same purpose as Stalin’s later characterizations of Lenin as a “philistine” and as “Goliath.” Certainly, the total rejection of Lenin as Party leader and as a Bolshevik that Stalin expressed that day indicates that as of April 1920 he believed it was time for Lenin to “get off the stage, making way for new men.” If Stalin did intend at that time to take steps toward removing
Lenin, he probably also intended soon to strike a pose as “David” in some public forum, in a speech or a newspaper article, in order to complete the theatrical ritual by which he surreptitiously declared his murderous design. The very recent capture of Tiflis could have provided him the perfect opportunity. If assassination was then his intention, probably the crisis initiated by the Polish invasion on April 25 robbed him of the chance.

* * *

At least two questions about Stalin’s letter to Lenin in March 1921 beg to be answered. First and most important, why did Stalin feel a need to denounce Lenin to his face? Second, why did Stalin think that he could attack Lenin to his face without being detected? Answering both questions requires considerable speculation. We shall address the second question first.

For fifteen years Stalin had made numerous Aesopian attacks on Lenin, all evidently without being detected. This experience must have developed in Stalin vast confidence in his ability to encode and to camouflage his Aesopian projects. Indeed, when we recognize that Stalin’s political life depended on keeping secret his attacks, it becomes apparent that his confidence in his rhetorical abilities was supreme. Recognizing the price that Stalin would pay for failure, however, also makes his attacking Lenin more enigmatic.

In trying to conceal the Aesopic content of the March 1921 letter (and of virtually all his Aesopic attacks), Stalin had the advantage that his victim had not the faintest reason to suspect that a high-ranking comrade would want to engage in a monolog against him cloaked in slave language. Of course, Stalin also masked the veiled content of the letter by camouflaging it with a veneer which misrepresented his purpose and deflected the reader away from the Aesopian plane. The effectiveness of this camouflage depended, in
part, on how well Stalin assessed Lenin's attitude toward him and how well he anticipated
Lenin's reactions to various components of the letter. Stalin's craftsmanship may best be
appreciated by speculating about how Lenin might have read the letter. Lenin had no
reason to think that the author of the little letter was anyone other than an essentially
loyal, though sometimes troublesome, subordinate. That Stalin was ambitious Lenin must
have been aware, but he surely did not recognize the unlimited grasp of Stalin's self-
image. He could not have thought that the poorly educated cobbler's son could think
himself a rival to the great Lenin for the leadership of Russian socialism. Stalin's behavior
confirmed his subservient status. As Trotsky has told us, in Party councils Stalin almost
unfailingly kept silent or supported Lenin, and there were but few overt signs—for
example, during the Polish War or in the recent case of policy toward Georgia—that he
was not always resigned to follow Lenin's lead. Additional corroboration of Stalin's
apparent subordination is to be found in the letter itself, where Stalin gives the impression
of looking upon Lenin as the decision-making leader. By indicating that Stalin was not au
courant with Party business, his opening assertion that he had just read the three months
old GOELRO report probably would have confirmed to Lenin that Stalin's inferior status
was deserved.

In letting Lenin know at the outset that his subject was not a matter of current
import, Stalin might also have been seeking to discourage his reader from paying close
attention to the letter. This effort may well have been rooted in a perception that Lenin
really never paid much attention to anything Stalin wrote: witness Lenin's apparent failure
to notice Stalin's *public and repeated* attacks on advocates of invading Poland in 1920.
Indeed, Angelica Balabanoff recalls that in 1920 Lenin apparently had not given much
thought to Stalin at all.¹⁹ Lenin was a very busy man, after all; this, his smugness about
his own superiority, and his condescending attitude toward Stalin, all would have
predisposed him not to bother much with what Stalin said. The pose Stalin presented as
being not current on important issues thus may have been meant to turn to his advantage
Lenin’s disinclination to waste time on what Stalin thought.

The most ingenious aspect of Stalin’s camouflage is his creating the impression
that he did indeed have an ulterior purpose in writing—and then letting Lenin discover a
satisfying, but false, explanation. Several factors might have caused Lenin to suspect that
his correspondent was up to something. First, for Lenin to receive a personal letter from
Stalin was apparently a rare occurrence. Second, there was no need for Stalin, who had
frequent opportunities at Party and government meetings to discuss matters with Lenin, to
write to him about the GOELRO plan. Finally, the chumminess of the letter is an obvious
pretense: Stalin and Lenin were not personal friends. Suspecting that Stalin was up to
something, Lenin would quickly have discovered what it was: the Georgian was trying to
curry favor with him while digging under Trotsky and Rykov. Such a ploy could be
expected from the conniving Stalin, particularly considering his bitter conflicts with
Trotsky in the past. Moreover, the clumsiness of Stalin’s effort would seem natural for a
man regarded by Party intellectuals as a ham-handed provincial. Lenin would thus likely
conclude that the letter was a typically boorish attempt by Stalin to improve his own
standing with Lenin at the expense of Rykov and Trotsky—a contemptible scrap of paper
that could be tossed aside without further consideration. What more perfect disguise for
an Aesopian document than a false “hidden agenda,” easily detectable and wholly
credible.

It is evident that Stalin’s camouflage was successful: Lenin did not discover the
Aesopic content of the Georgian’s letter. We may note, however, that even if Lenin had
discovered the presence of Aesopian language and figured out its meaning, Stalin’s
method of encrypting his message would have prevented Lenin from comprehending its
most important point. Had Lenin become suspicious of the letter and devoted time to
analyzing it, he might have figured out that Stalin regarded his ending of socialist
construction as a betrayal of Marxist principle. It is barely conceivable that he might also
have figured out that Stalin’s imputation of philistinism was actually directed against him. But on the evidence in the letter itself, Lenin could go not further. In particular, he could not ascertain the deeper meaning of the charge of philistinism. This meaning becomes evident only when the letter is understood in conjunction with Stalin’s pose as David a few days earlier at the Tenth Party Congress, a pose which itself is buried under the obscurity of Stalin’s historical allusion.

Because it is utterly nonsensical to think that Lenin was meant to discover the Aesopian death sentence that Stalin had imposed on him, it is evident that the purpose of Stalin’s letter was not to communicate but to satisfy some private need. But what need could Stalin satisfy by secretly throwing down the gauntlet, so to speak, right under Lenin’s nose? Two possible explanations present themselves. First, because Stalin could pretend that he had given Lenin a chance (no matter how unrealistic) to discover the murderous design and take measures to save himself, Stalin could have counted his Aesopic declaration as fulfilling the requirements of some perverse notion of fair play, thereby minimizing any feelings of sin or guilt he might feel for the crime he was about to commit. Some support for this supposition is offered by the fact that when Stalin reviewed Lenin’s career in April 1920 he did credit Lenin with making some positive contributions to the Party even while he condemned Lenin’s overall record.

A second possible explanation of Stalin’s letter is that by “telling” Lenin what was coming, Stalin was playing a monstrous joke on his victim, a joke which offered Beso’s son vengeful proof that he was indeed cleverer than and intellectually superior to the foremost of the sons of privileged Russia. This speculation finds support in Stalin’s attribution to Lenin of Manilovism, for Manilov’s serfs could play him for a fool to his face. At first the joke was just on Lenin, but in early 1924, when Stalin publicly called Lenin “Goliath,” the whole Party—the Party that respected the unworthy Lenin while still failing to recognize Stalin’s true greatness—became the butt of the joke. Later in the 1920s, when Stalin openly identified himself as David and published his little letter to
Lenin, all of Russia became the butt. In 1935 Stalin laughed louder still when Henri Barbusse's authorized biography of the *vozh'd* appeared, in which the chapter encompassing Lenin's death was entitled “The First Stones.” And finally, with the publication in his collected works of the evidence of his crime for all to see, the murderer, safe behind the false face that he had constructed even with the help of his enemies, indulged himself in an infinite jest, laughing down through all of time at Lenin and all the other smug and arrogant intellectuals.

1 The letter is at SW, 5:50-51. SW gives the date only as March 1921; the assumption that it was written shortly after the Congress is based on its being placed after the Congress materials in Stalin’s *Works*. Other examples of personal communication by Stalin to Lenin are few: he claimed to have written a letter to Lenin in 1903, but no confirmation of this claim has been found; from Siberia in February 1915 he wrote a short letter to Lenin; and in 1923, after Lenin complained about Stalin’s abusive treatment of Krupskaya, Stalin wrote a reply to him. Only the 1915 and 1921 letters were published during Stalin’s lifetime.

2 The only reference to the letter I have found in Western historical literature is at Tucker, *Stalin*, 394, where the letter is briefly mentioned as an attack on Trotsky.

3 Stalin’s “illness” brings to mind Trotsky’s report that Stalin often “sulked and hid away for a few days in the country” when he disagreed with Lenin (Trotsky, *My Life*, 461).

4 This word in the Russian original is *edinyi*. “Comprehensive” will be used consistently in this chapter to render *edinyi*; I find it more adequate than either “single” or “integrated,” the words used by the official translators of SW and LCW, respectively.

5 All emphases are Stalin’s.

6 See chapter 19; Lenin had praised the GOELRO plan to the Congress as placing Russia “on the real economic basis required for communism” and even called it “the second Program of our Party.”

7 LCW, 32:137-45.

8 In the original Russian, Stalin’s words, *edinyi khoziaistvennyi plan*, directly reference Lenin’s title, *Ob edinom khoziaistvennom plane*.

9 KPSS, 2:151.

10 SW, 5:50. See chapter 6, note 13, of the present essay for a brief discussion of the Ibsen reference.
11 *Vos’moi vserossiiskii s’ezd sovetov rabochikh, krest’ianskikh, krasnoarmeiskikh, kazachnikh deputatov. Stenograficheskii otchet, 22-29 dekabria 1920 goda* (Moscow, 1921), 88-118.

12 SW, 5:50-51; Stalin’s emphasis.

13 Those who would like to see evidence now may consult SW, 5:190-92, 201-54, 329-30, 349-55, and 368-79.

14 SW, 6:2.

15 SW, 6:41.

16 SW, 6:36; SS, 6:36. Stalin’s allusion to Lenin as Goliath is confirmed by the text of Stalin’s remarks in *Pravda*, January 21, 1924. That Stalin intended to refer to Lenin as Goliath and not merely as a “giant,” is indicated by his using the capitalized proper name “Goliaf” instead of any of the common Russian words for “giant” (e.g., *gigant*, *ispolin*, or *velikan*).

17 SW, 6:56; SS, 6:54.

18 SW, 4:328; SS, 4:316.


21 Stalin first published the letter to Lenin in 1929 in a collection of writings commemorating his fiftieth birthday (SW, 5:51).

22 See chapter V of Barbusse, *Stalin*, covering the years 1917-1927.