

Stalin's Wars Roundtable Review
Review by Caroline Kennedy-Pipe



Reviewed Work:

Geoffrey Roberts. *Stalin's Wars. From World War to Cold War 1939-1953.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 496 pp. Illustrations, maps, chronology, bibliographical references, index. ISBN-10: 0300112041.

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Given the current and recent desire of the United States to combat the influence of dictators such as Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam, and Kim Jong-Il, a book about one of the greatest - or most infamous - of previous dictators opposed by the United States is obviously timely. Geoffrey Roberts' new book on Stalin, however, is not only timely but, in certain respects courageous, because any attempt to find positive aspects in the actions and mentality of a man now almost universally reviled is bound to meet with opposition, ire and a degree of controversy. And so it has proved. Some reviewers have already seen in this book an apologia for a man without a redeeming feature and a system that has been thoroughly discredited. To find anything that is good in the dictatorship of Josef Stalin is a step too far for those quite accustomed to focussing on the – unquestionably - very dark features of Stalin's rule.

Caroline Kennedy-Pipe is a Professor at the University of Warwick. She is the author of Russia and the World (1998) and The Origins of the Cold War (2007) as well as a number of articles in Journal of Cold War Studies, International Affairs, and International Relations.

Of course, the crime list is familiar. Even before the outbreak of World War Two, Stalin was guilty of what we would now term genocide against his own people, guilty of the suppression of human rights, the purging of intellectuals, the military, and the scientists, and the wholesale eradication of dignity for many caught in the gulags. During the early years of world war, Stalin's 'cunning' was in the minds of many, responsible for the betrayal of the Baltic States and indeed of the Western powers themselves through the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Soviet neutrality as guaranteed by that pact provided cover for Hitler on his eastern flank while he waged war in the west. The subsequent Soviet occupation of eastern Poland and the conflict with Finland ended with Helsinki agreeing to Soviet terms and the eroding of Finnish sovereignty. In addition to Stalin's duplicity towards the West, there is a general agreement that as war leader he committed a catastrophic error in not foreseeing the betrayal by Hitler in 1941. The devastating *volte face* by Hitler and the German invasion of the USSR has been characterised by a variety of sources as Stalin's greatest strategic error. Dmitri Volkogonov, a previous biographer of Stalin, claimed it was an error of catastrophic proportions. Stories abound of the dictator suffering a nervous breakdown as a result of this blunder, while military historians debate how and why the strategic deceptions of Hitler outplayed the usually wily Stalin.

In his book Roberts quite clearly seeks to argue against quite a lot of this. He does not deny that Stalin was hardly a poster boy for the liberal intelligentsia, does not minimize his cruelty, and does not engage in an extended apologia for the regime. But he does work hard to try and dispel a number of myths – not least the one of the dictator's breakdown – and argues that, considered simply as a political actor and especially as a war leader, Stalin has been grossly underestimated. Scholars of course have long disagreed about Stalin and his capacities and capabilities as warlord. There is, however, no doubt over his central role and command of the Soviet rebuttal of Germany and subsequent victory. Stalin was Supreme Commander of the Soviet armed forces, head of the State Defence Council and People's Commissar for Defence, as well as head of the Party and the Government. Stalin himself oversaw most of the detail of the war as well as strategic decision-

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making. In this context, Stalin stands accused of a catalogue of errors both tactical and strategic -- the ill-conceived offensives, the refusal to countenance strategic retreats and the meddling in frontline situations. And there is the criticism, so compelling in this current casualty-averse age, that Stalin was careless and indifferent to the sheer scale of suffering endured by the Soviet Army and peoples. Did the Soviet Union really need to lose some 8 million men to death and some 8 million to injury? Was this, in itself not revealing of the nature of the man and his regime? Was Order No 227, dubbed not 'one step back' really necessary?

To add to this catalogue of cruelty by the Soviet dictator is also the now well known story of Stalin as duplicitous wartime ally and the sole architect of the Cold War. It is argued most notably in what we know as the traditionalist account of the Cold War that even as World War II unfolded Stalin foresaw the emerging global competition with the United States and sought from 1943 onwards to demarcate Soviet influence throughout East and Central Europe, to ensure that Churchill and Roosevelt agreed to Soviet post war aims and to irrevocably crush democracy. In this version Stalin raced for Berlin to ensure control of Germany, sought to carve out an Empire throughout Europe and sought footholds in the Middle East and Asia. As the great Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis has argued, with Stalin in power it was inevitable that confrontation would occur. How could democracies such as the United States adequately deal with this ruthless and cunning agent of Communism? The answer, we know was under the stewardship of Harry S Truman and his successors the adoption of containment, the advocacy of nuclear deterrence, and the construction of a new international economic order designed to isolate and marginalize Soviet interests and ambitions. In addition, the West created brand-new institutions such as NATO to stand against the omnipresent Soviet threat. Part and parcel of this story is the duping of politicians such as Roosevelt as to the true and essential nature of the dictator. Even those historians who concede Stalin's personal charm, grasp of detail and vision, have lamented the inability of Western diplomats and politicians to deal effectively with the dictator in the war years over key issues such as Poland and the division of Germany.

So what does Roberts have to offer us in this book which would sustain his claim that we should rightly consider Stalin the wartime generalissimo? In the first place, Roberts offers us unparalleled expertise and insight into the Russian sources. Roberts has clearly been a veritable 'mole' in the Russian archives over a number of years which enables him with some authority to marshal new evidence and offer new sources that strengthen his claims. This in itself is an impressive achievement. The book is an extremely powerful catalogue of primary evidence that all scholars will find useful and stimulating for years to come.

Secondly, Roberts also does something else which at this historical juncture is important. He reminds us in the chapters on the war years that conflict is in fact always brutal, in so many ways senseless, but that it may also be an effective -- perhaps the only effective -- instrument for dealing with expansionist revisionist powers. He also reminds us that in this particular case, the war was actually won not by gallant Britain or generous America (although Britain was gallant and America was generous) but through the blood and suffering of the Soviet people. The Soviet figures are quite simply awesome in terms of loss and heroism and yes barbarity. The German army inflicted huge wounds right up to the very bitter end in the battle over Berlin. There is no

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reason to suppose that Stalin wished to take these losses any more than there is reason or evidence to support that he sought to sacrifice his own people to fascism.

Roberts points to the compelling connection between the war years and the peace sought by Stalin. Roberts underlines the experiences of the war with Germany as directly feeding into Soviet expectations for the post-war era. It is clear that whatever we now see of a benign Germany wearied by its militaristic past that Stalin had a clear view of German potential, power, and ambition. Roberts again and again reminds us of Stalinist fears that Russia would face a resurgent Germany unrestrained by a failing France and Britain and an indifferent and isolationist America. Many historians of the Cold War seem to have forgotten or make light of the connection between Soviet sacrifice and Soviet expectations. This is a rather peculiar omission especially by American scholars. American losses in Vietnam of some 58,000 dead are accepted to have affected the conduct of foreign policy for decades and indeed still cast long shadows over contemporary conflicts, yet there is little attention paid to the Soviet war dead. Roberts does not make the mistake of ignoring the ghosts of war – there is to his mind an intimate connection between the Soviet war experience and its construction of the peace. Roberts points to this as the motor for wishing to see Germany destroyed and constrained but his point is one that he has made before – the dictator sought cooperation, not confrontation, with the United States.

Roberts also make a third point about Stalin and his expectations after the war. Soviet sacrifice needed to be rewarded after the defeat of Germany and Japan. Here there was a good old fashioned geo-political interest at stake. Russia had to be preserved from future threats with the construction of a sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe. For Stalin this was for a number of reasons simply non-negotiable. However the dictator proved surprisingly phlegmatic over rebuffs over Soviet influence in the Turkish straits, Iran, and Greece.

Yet, as Roberts points out, these confrontations of 1946 necessarily soured the mood of wartime cooperation and inspired the first steps to Cold War. However, Stalin did not seek Cold War but rather, as Roberts argues, wanted to pursue the benefits of alliance. He charts in some detail the Soviet attempts to keep the grand alliance on the rails, for example citing the deliberately restrained response to Churchill's celebrated Fulton Speech. According to Roberts, what put the final the nails into the coffin of post-war cooperation was the prospects of a new international economic order as signalled through the Marshall Plan – a new international order from which the USSR was excluded. As Roberts highlights while Western leaders spoke of Soviet expansionism, Stalin complained of Anglo-American globalism. (p.25) Roberts charts the Soviet response in terms of a reinvigoration of ideological struggle and a catalogue of missteps which merely hardened American resolve. Here the Berlin crisis, the Czech coup, and Soviet involvement in the outbreak of the Korean War were errors, the last of which had the potential to make real the nuclear threat. One fascinating question is how the Generalissimo came to misread the international politics of the United States in these questions, providing for a Cold War structure that certainly the Soviet dictator did not wish for.

Here again Roberts points to something that is a rather unfashionable point but clearly central for all that: the importance of ideology in the making of foreign policy. Roberts clearly details the

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influence and, yes, hopes of the Soviet dictator that there would be a left wing swing within Europe after the war and that Communism could and would spread. He was, of course, wrong and Communist power in Europe proved illusory. The interesting question here is not why Stalin was wrong - and Roberts is clear that Stalin accepted the failure of Communism throughout Western Europe - but why a buoyant and prosperous U.S. felt so threatened by the ideas which at best became pretty marginal to the politics of Western Europe and the United States.

What Roberts does brilliantly is to ask the question as to why Stalin's contemporaries such as Churchill and Roosevelt had perhaps a better grasp of his personality and politics than those who came after them. And he makes very clear that part of their admiration was the admiration of two extremely clever and experienced political actors for a third. And, he suggests, we should take that admiration as a serious fact. Of course, Stalin made mistakes, as a politician and as a war leader - but then what politician and war leader does not? What Roberts insists on, however, - and what the evidence he has assembled in this books forces us to confront - is that *without* Stalin's leadership the Nazi's might just have won the war and that therefore even those of us who despise him owe him a good deal.

There is, then, in this book a sobering argument that those who decry the communist experiment and deny it any positive role in the ideological and geopolitical transformations of the twentieth century must come to terms with. There is also a powerful marshalling of the historical record that suggests negative judgements on Stalin's leadership need to be reconsidered. Overall, this is a powerful and impressive book that makes an important case well. But we might perhaps close by just posing one question that Robert does not really address. That is simply the relationship between political leadership and political system, or, perhaps better, between the techniques of politics and the purposes of politics. The assumption that seems to guide Roberts here is that there is a disjuncture between the two - that one can admire political technique, political skill in war and peace independently of what one considers the ends of politics to be and whether or not the relevant political system is addressing them. Yet it is surely not off the point to suggest that this is far from being clear. It was Hannah Arendt, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, who pointed out most clearly that the mark of barbarism is the failure to connect a political system and all the values it sustains with the personal virtues of its inhabitants. While we cannot fault Roberts for not answering a question he never really asks, is it not the case that for his rehabilitation of Stalin to truly convince, he would need to ask, and answer, it?

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