

**Stalin's Wars Roundtable Review**  
**Reviewed by Vladislav Zubok**



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.

Roundtable Chair: Warren F. Kimball (moderator)

Reviewers: Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, Thomas R. Maddux, Constantine Pleshakov, Gerhard L. Weinberg, Vladislav Zubok

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**Review by Vladislav Zubok, Temple University**

**G**oeffrey Roberts' *Stalin's Wars* is a highly uneven book. It contains a very provocative thesis ("rehabilitating" Stalin as a great statesman), a significant amount of new sources, and a gap between the claim and the sources.

The book is not without merits. It fills an extremely important niche in the historiography, covering the period from the Nazi-Soviet pact to the Korean war. I can only applaud treating World War II and the early phases of the cold war as a continuum. In the historiography divided artificially into the "history of World War II" and "cold war history" this book is a marvelous exception. Also, Roberts sums up impressive amount of new archival evidence: diaries, and all kinds of other sources, Western and Soviet that have been painstakingly collected by other researchers, including Mark Kramer and his Harvard Project on Cold War Studies, the National Security Archive, and the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) in Washington, D.C.<sup>1</sup> Most of the Russian new evidence has been already published in Russian, yet Roberts is one of the first scholars who incorporates it into Western historiography.

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Among the new sources used in the book are the documents on Stalin's interaction with Churchill and Roosevelt during the war collected by Oleg Rzheshhevsky (they also appeared in English); some diaries and recollections, among them by the Minister of Tank Industry Vyacheslav Malyshev (published in the Moscow archival journal *Istochnik*) and by the secretary of the Council of Ministers Yakov Chadaev (published by G.A.Kumanev in his 1991 book *At Stalin's Side* in Russian). Roberts also uses the collection of intelligence reports "1941," including the reports to Stalin from the GRU head Filip Golikov on the eve of the German attack. The author also used the archival documents on Soviet policies in Eastern Europe in the 1940s, collected by Galina Murashko and her collaborators; the volumes on Soviet policies in Germany collected by Johan Laufer and Georgy Kynin; Georgy Dimitrov's diary (it was published in English), and the classified journal "Voprosi vneshnei

<sup>1</sup> [Ed. Note] Harvard Project on Cold War Studies, <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~hpcws/>; the National Security Archive, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>; and CWIHP, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic\\_id=1409](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic_id=1409).

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politiki" published in 1944-47 by the Central Committee Department for Foreign Policy Information (the staff of the disbanded Comintern).

At the same time, there are significant gaps in the evidence used by Roberts. Some of them I will point out in the review below.

The book illustrates the adage: nothing attracts so much attention as a wrong thesis. Roberts dons the mantle of the devil's advocate (sometimes a fruitful exercise) but he is overzealous in doing it (see the similar observation was voiced also by Eric Lohr, American University, and Steven A. Barnes, George Mason University, during the discussion at the Cold War International History Project, April 18, 2007).<sup>2</sup> His *a priori* position is defending Stalin against his attackers but this defense is based on insufficient and sometimes selective evidence. His conclusions are often tenuous, and there are a sufficient number of glib statements that compromise the whole exercise.

First thesis. Without Stalin and the state he ran with iron hand, Hitler would have won the war. I am not a historian of World War II but I was surprised to read Roberts citing from the volume of documents "1941" on Soviet intelligence to Stalin on the eve of the Nazi invasion: "On the night of 21-22 June this vast force [Soviet army - VZ] was put on alert and warned to expect a surprise attack by the Germans." And it is quite astonishing to read on p. 70: "...the German surprise attack on 22 June 1941 surprised no one, not even Stalin." Perhaps I overlooked some revolutionary scoops on this point, but what I know is the following: Stalin did not allow the Soviet military to return fire for hours after *Barbarossa* started because he did not expect the German invasion. Perhaps Zhukov and a number of the military expected the war, but not Stalin. And 200 million Soviet citizens experienced such a strong shock that it would continue to shape the Soviet mentality for the next several decades through the Cold War. The book, incidentally, ignores the explanations that Mikhail Milstein, a GRU veteran (one of Golikov's deputies there) gave to the language of the GRU reports before June 22. Stalin mistrusted all the GRU spies, so Golikov had to resort to a trick: he reported on the facts of German preparations but added (to avoid Stalin's wrath) some phrases about their "unreliable" provenance.

On p. 107 Roberts has a caption: "Stalin saves Moscow." Although Stalin's measures ended the October 16 panic in the city, Zhukov's role and other factors (the Wehrmacht's overreach, dropping temperatures, etc.) helped to save Moscow more than Stalin's terror. A few pages down Roberts admits that "it is impossible to assess with any degree of accuracy the contribution Stalin's intervention made to Soviet success in the battle of Moscow..." (p. 111) Why then make such a sweeping claim?

Second thesis. Stalin worked hard to make the Grand Alliance a success and wanted to see it continue after the war. Attempting to interpret Stalin's mind-frame at the end of World

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<sup>2</sup> [Ed. Note] A video of this event is CWIHP event is available, via [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.event\\_summary&event\\_id=224842](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.event_summary&event_id=224842), accessed 21 July 2007.

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War II, Roberts borrows a lot from the original research of Russian historian Vladimir Pechatnov who analyzed the 1943-45 internal memos on the desirable post-war settlements written by Litvinov and Maisky, as well as the Soviet ambassador in Washington Andrei Gromyko. Pechatnov concludes that these authors, especially Litvinov and Maisky, made considerable mistakes in their forecasts: they believed in the inevitability of the British-American contradictions after the war and completely missed the new global role of the United States (I made a similar conclusion in my book with Pleshakov in 1996). Also, the Soviet planners assumed that a confrontation between the Western powers and the USSR in Europe and the Balkans could be avoided by making “amicable agreements” on spheres of influence and keeping these spheres of influence “open.” Pechatnov admits that Stalin and Molotov implemented some elements from Maisky’s and Litvinov’s forecasts and proposals but does specify which ones they rejected and why. (Vladimir Pechatnov, *Stalin, Ruzvelt, Truman: SSSR i SShA v 1940khgg. Dokumentalnie ocherki*. Moscow: Terra, 2006, 254-256)

Roberts goes beyond Pechatnov’s propositions. He claims that all three authors operated within the sphere of the permissible, trying to deduce what was on Stalin’s mind: “In short, it is reasonable to assume that the speculations of Gromyko, Litvinov, and Maiskii on the shape of the postwar world were not idiosyncratic but reflected the language and terms of the internal discourse on foreign policy and international relations that was taking place at the highest levels of decision-making.” (p. 234) Knowing what we know about Maisky and Litvinov, it is more plausible to suggest that both of them hoped to influence Stalin with their forecasts and suggestions, and to indicate to the suspicious dictator any room for diplomacy and negotiations. If so, they failed completely. Other new sources not used by Roberts (portions of Maisky’s diary published in Kynin-Laufer volumes “USSR and the German Question” and especially Litvinov’s conversation with CBS correspondent in Moscow Richard C. Hottelet on June 18, 1946) indicate the frustration of these planners at their inability to impress Stalin with their conclusions and logic.

Thesis Three. Stalin did not want to Sovietize Eastern Europe and began to do so only after the breakout of the Cold War. Roberts describes Stalin’s “stop on the Vistula” during the Warsaw uprising of 1944 as dictated by purely military motives. While there were plenty of military reasons to make a stop, it was also quite obvious that Stalin was irritated by the Western attempts to help the Home Army. Roberts ignores new evidence that has been available for a long time (on the SMERSH activities in Poland, Nikita Petrov’s monograph on Ivan Serov) on the efforts of the Soviet secret police to eradicate the Polish anti-communist anti-Russian underground. Roberts quotes (from T. Volokitina, T. Islamov, G. Murashko, A. Noskova, i.a., eds., *Vostochnaia Evropa v dokumentakh rossiiskikh arkhivov*, vol. 1, 1944-1948 (Moscow-Novosibirsk: Sibirsky khronograf, 1997) and vol. 2, 1949-1953 (Moscow-Novosibirsk: Sibirsky khronograf, 1998) as well as from Dimitrov’s diary) Stalin talking to the Yugoslavs about “Slavophilism” and the consolidation of the Slavic people of Europe under the Soviet wing against a possible German menace. He also quotes Stalin speaking about factions of capitalists; “We are currently allied with one faction against the other, but in the future we will be allied against the first faction of capitalists, too.” Roberts’

interpretation: "What was really on Stalin's mind was the long-term German threat and the need for Slavic unity to confront it." There are, however, different interpretations (e.g. by Leonid Gibiansky and Norman Naimark) that do not give much credit to Stalin's "Slavophilism." The bulk of the evidence in Murashko's volume and Dimitrov's diary shows Stalin cynically manipulating historical, nationalist, and other motives and images in the name of consolidating a Soviet *exclusive* sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in the Balkans.

Roberts repeats (with variations) in his book that "Stalin did not see this ideological project [the gradual spread of communism in Europe] as incompatible with prolonged postwar collaboration with his partners in the Grand Alliance, including an inevitable division of interests across the globe." (p. 25 with reference to the works of Pechatnov, Silvio Pons, Norman Naimark, and Eduard Mark). Roberts also concludes: "ultimately Stalin's radical change of strategy and tactics in the region was prompted by the outbreak of the cold war in 1947" (p. 253). There is a big division and debate between Western and Russian scholars about the degree of Sovietization of Central and Eastern Europe in 1945-47 and, most importantly, if it was just the Cold War (the Marshall Plan) that "forced" Stalin to start this Sovietization or it was the inner logic of Soviet policies in this region. One wishes that Roberts engaged more with the other side in this debate. What about Stalin's other admissions, the most famous of which is the one recorded by Milovan Djilas that suggests Stalin's ideological beliefs in the inevitability of conflict with capitalism? And what about Molotov's later observations to Chuev: "We had to consolidate what had been conquered. The [Eastern] part of Germany had to be transformed into our Socialist Germany...."? Roberts does not evaluate this evidence.

Roberts and I are in agreement that the cold war was not "Stalin's preferred choice" (p. 253). Yet, I do not subscribe to Roberts' conclusion that "Stalin mistakenly projected his own rationality and calculations on the others," i.e. the Western powers. Does Roberts imply that Truman, Churchill, Byrnes, Marshall, and their Western European partners acted "irrationally" when they began to practice containment of Stalin's USSR, advanced the Marshall Plan and began to organize the separate West Germany? Does it mean that Stalin who had made one mistake of trusting Hitler, made another similar mistake in trusting the Western allies? Stalin the Gullible? Unfortunately, there is no evidence for this beside some of Stalin's self-serving rhetoric to foreigners (on this later).

The absence of Stalin's ideological mind-frame in the book is striking. In fact, Stalin comes out as a completely rational and pragmatic leader, in a sense more pragmatic than the Western politicians who dealt with him. Also, even more surprisingly, Roberts gives more credit to "Stalin's story" than to the "story" related by Truman, Churchill, and other Western statesmen. For instance, he concludes that, contrary to Truman's assertion, an "acerbic exchange" between him with Molotov on April 23, 1945 – on Soviet violations of Yalta's Declaration of Liberated Europe in Poland - never took place. Indeed, neither the American nor the Soviet record contains the version told by Truman's memoirs. At the same time Roberts forgets to cite the valuable testimony of Oleg Troyanovsky who heard

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from Andrei Gromyko how it happened. According to Gromyko (who omitted this in his memoirs), Truman “immediately began to attack.” Molotov was taken by surprise and seemed disoriented. He was prepared to respond to Truman’s tirade, but the President abruptly ended the meeting. Molotov was “visibly worried. He could foresee that Truman’s behavior might evoke a very negative reaction in Moscow” and had reason to think that “Stalin might put responsibility for what happened on his shoulders.” When Molotov and Gromyko returned to the Soviet embassy, they together spent a lot of time writing a telegram to Stalin where the unpleasant end of the conversation was obfuscated. (Oleg Troyanovsky, *Cherez gody i rasstoiania*. Moscow: Vagrius, 1997, pp. 129-130). It is strange that Roberts ignores this evidence.

Roberts’ description of Stalin’s policy in Germany in 1945-52 draws on the notion that Stalin had “hopes” that the entire Germany would turn after the war into a democratic, anti-fascist country. The new evidence (not used by Roberts) about the discussion of the proposal of James Byrnes to demilitarize Germany for 20 years, however, reveals that Stalin, as well as his entourage, did not want to withdraw Soviet troops from East Germany under any circumstances. It is more plausible to suggest that Stalin was determined to occupy East Germany indefinitely – but he recognized (in fact, overestimated) the power of German nationalism (he also did the same in the case of Japan) and wanted to direct the surmised German nationalistic fervor against the Western powers in a competition for “German soul.”

Thesis Four. Stalin had a reasonable and limited policy ambitions after the war that the West failed to satisfy. In this vein, Stalin’s probes in Turkey and Iran were also reasonable and limited. Roberts writes: “Soviet Black Sea bases were close to Stalin’s Georgian heart and, as always, he accorded high priority to control of vital economic resources such as oil.” (p. 311) He does not cite, however, the plethora of new sources on the Iranian crisis, produced by Jamil Hasanli (published recently in English but available in Russian since 2004). There is no “Georgian heart” to be found there. This evidence shows that in Iran Stalin planned to obtain oil concessions and perhaps even create a puppet “Iranian Azerbaijan” state, relying on the force of the Red Army, the secret police, and the power of regional ethnic separatism. In Turkey, as the Armenian and Georgian archival sources indicate (cited in another book by Hasanli), Stalin used blatant pressure in combination with the “Armenian card,” i.e. the repatriation of the Armenians to Soviet Armenia, in expectation that the United States would not object. In the end, even Stalin’s lieutenant Vyacheslav Molotov believed that the pressure on Turkey and Iran was unreasonable, and Stalin was unnecessary provocative.

Had Stalin obtained, with the consent of the Western allies, access to the Iranian oil reserves and to the Mediterranean, would the Soviet Union have become the “status quo” power, responsible and reliable? The book does not discuss this key issue. Yet, given the nature of the Stalinist regime the answer seems apparent.

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Thesis Five. Stalin's own identity as a Soviet patriot and Russian nationalist. It would be an ironic posthumous triumph for Stalin to grant him the title of the most successful Russian nationalist. In the chapter on the Soviet home front Roberts cites Elena Zubkova's book (*Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957*. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998.) – but he does it selectively, focusing on her conclusions and evidence that many war veterans and Soviet officials identified themselves with Stalin's irritation and anger at Churchill and Western politicians. In fact, as other sources demonstrate, Stalin was afraid of genuine Russian nationalism (hence, the Leningrad affair in 1949-50). He misused and manipulated it during the war and after it, just like he used and manipulated German nationalism, Georgian, Azeri, Ukrainian, etc. Finally, one simply cannot avoid the major issue of the cost of the war for Russians. As a number of war historians agree, this cost was to a great extent Stalin's fault, as well as Hitler's.

Thesis Six. Stalin mellowed after the War, he did not have a great terror, and actually, the Thaw and “de-Stalinization” began during the last years of Stalin's life. Here Roberts adopts the conclusions from the recent book by Yoram Gorfitsky and Oleg Khlevniuk (*Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945-1953*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.) Yet, he pushes the envelope too far. He writes: “Stalin was actively rethinking the universal validity of the Soviet model of revolution and socialism” (249). The whole dynamics inside the communist camp were based on the assumption that Stalin was always right and the Soviet experience was superior to any other revolutionary experience. Also, the book stands on the erroneous thesis that Stalinist repressions stopped during the war and “returned” only after its end (p. 336). Roberts uses the sources on the postwar terror quite selectively, and obfuscates some facts on repressions that are proven beyond doubt. For instance, the Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels in Roberts' book was killed in 1948 “possibly at the hands of the Soviet security forces.” (p.338) This “possibly” should have not been used, given the documentary evidence on Stalin's personal involvement in Mikhoels' murder and the MGB-MVD's furious crackdown against the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and its leadership. Roberts' presentation of the evidence on Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign in 1949-53 is a bit confusing. In citing Malyshev's diary, December 1, 1952, he writes that for Stalin “every Jew-Nationalist” was the enemy, i.e. not Jews, but just “Jews-Nationalists.” The Russian original is ambiguous and can be equally translated: “Any Jew is a nationalist and an agent of American intelligence.” (I use the working translation of the Cold War International History Project). The date when the USSR broke diplomatic relations with Israel is wrong in the book (1952). This happened January 1953, in the wake of the Pravda's publication on the “Kremlin doctors.” At the same time, Roberts later in the book writes that “all Jews were politically suspect because of their race unless proven otherwise.” (p. 341)

A final observation on the methodology of reading Soviet sources. Roberts acts on the best historian's instincts when he combines the public sources, such as *Pravda* articles, the discussions of the Big Three, etc., with new evidence from the secret archives. Yet, his agenda narrows his view of these sources. He uses sources to illustrate his *a priori* theses, instead of looking at the sources as a historian, probing for their subtle and ambiguous

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context, looking beyond what was recorded towards what was omitted. As some who knew Stalin remembered: Stalin liked secrecy, and for him, if two people knew a secret, it meant it was no longer a secret. As a result, even Stalin's archive does not reveal us most intimate thoughts of the *Vozhd*. In the end, the book's main fault is that it gives Stalin too much credit of trust. Roberts seems to assume that whatever Stalin said and wrote, publicly or secretly, was true – in other words, that Stalin really *meant* it. We know how many people perished because they trusted Stalin's words, and took them at a face value. Taking Stalin's *words* as facts is a methodological approach for Roberts. For me it is a bizarre misunderstanding of Stalin's personality, and the nature of his immense power.

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