



Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928

By Stephen Kotkin

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A magnificent new biography that revolutionizes our understanding of Stalin and his world

It has the quality of myth: a poor cobbler's son, a seminarian from an oppressed outer province of the Russian empire, reinvents himself as a top leader in a band of revolutionary zealots. When the band seizes control of the country in the aftermath of total world war, the former seminarian ruthlessly dominates the new regime until he stands as absolute ruler of a vast and terrible state apparatus, with dominion over Eurasia. While still building his power base within the Bolshevik dictatorship, he embarks upon the greatest gamble of his political life and the largest program of social reengineering ever attempted: the collectivization of all agriculture and industry across one sixth of the earth. Millions will die, and many more millions will suffer, but the man will push through to the end against all resistance and doubts.

Where did such power come from? In *Stalin*, Stephen Kotkin offers a biography that, at long last, is equal to this shrewd, sociopathic, charismatic dictator in all his dimensions. The character of Stalin emerges as both astute and blinkered, cynical and true believing, people oriented and vicious, canny enough to see through people but prone to nonsensical beliefs. We see a man inclined to despotism who could be utterly charming, a pragmatic ideologue, a leader who obsessed over slights yet was a precocious geostrategic thinker—unique among Bolsheviks—and yet who made egregious strategic blunders. Through it all, we see Stalin's unflinching persistence, his sheer force of will—perhaps the ultimate key to understanding his indelible mark on history.

Stalin gives an intimate view of the Bolshevik regime's inner geography of power, bringing to the fore fresh materials from Soviet military intelligence and the secret police. Kotkin rejects the inherited wisdom about Stalin's psychological makeup, showing us instead how Stalin's near paranoia was fundamentally political, and closely tracks the Bolshevik revolution's structural paranoia, the predicament of a Communist regime in an overwhelmingly capitalist world, surrounded and penetrated by enemies. At the same time, Kotkin demonstrates the impossibility of understanding Stalin's momentous decisions outside of the context of the tragic history of imperial Russia.

The product of a decade of intrepid research, *Stalin* is a landmark achievement, a work that recasts the way we think about the Soviet Union, revolution, dictatorship, the twentieth century, and indeed the art of history itself.

***Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941* will be published by Penguin Press in October 2017**

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Editorial Review

Review

Jennifer Siegel, The New York Times Book Review:

“Masterly.... Kotkin offers the sweeping context so often missing from all but the best biographies. In his introductory chapter he makes the lofty assertion that a history of Stalin is akin to “a history of the world”.... and he delivers not only a history of the late imperial Russia and of the revolution and early Soviet state, but also frequent commentary on the global geopolitics at play. [Stalin] presents a riveting tale, written with pace and aplomb. Kotkin has given us a textured, gripping examination of the foundational years of the man most responsible for the construction of the Soviet state in all its brutal glory. The first volume leaves the reader longing for the story still to come.”

The Wall Street Journal:

“Superb... Mr. Kotkin’s volume joins an impressive shelf of books on Stalin. Only Mr. Kotkin’s book approaches the highest standard of scholarly rigor and general-interest readability.”

Richard Pipes, The New York Review of Books:

“This is a very serious biography that... is likely to well stand the test of time.”

New Statesman (UK):

“[Kotkin’s] viewpoint is godlike: all the world falls within his purview. He makes comparisons across decades and continents.... An exhilarating ride.”

Anne Applebaum, The Atlantic:

“An exceptionally ambitious biography... Kotkin builds the case for quite a different interpretation of Stalin—and for quite a few other things, too. The book’s signature achievement... is its vast scope: Kotkin has set out to write not only the definitive life of Stalin but also the definitive history of the collapse of the Russian empire and the creation of the new Soviet empire in its place.”

The American Scholar:

“Magnificent and magisterial, Kotkin’s study sheds unexpected light on all sorts of thorny problems.... [T]he narrative is not only profound but thrilling.”

Robert Gellately, Times Higher Education (London):

“A brilliant portrait of a man of contradictions... In the vast literature on the Soviet Union, there is no study to rival Stephen Kotkin’s massive first instalment of a planned three-volume biography of Joseph Stalin. When it is complete, it will surely become the standard work, and I heartily recommend it.”

John Thornhill, Financial Times:

“It is a measure of Kotkin’s powers of research and explanation that Stalin’s decisions can almost always be understood within the framework of his ideology and the context of his times.... With a ferocious determination worthy of his subject, the author debunks many of the myths to have encrusted themselves around Stalin.... [A] magnificent biography. This reviewer, at least, is already impatient to read the next two volumes for their author’s mastery of detail and the swagger of his judgments.”

David Johnson, Johnson’s Russia List:

“Required reading for serious Russia-watchers... As the product of years of work and careful thought, it is for me a reminder of what it takes to get close to the truth about important and controversial subjects. And the distance and time required to do so.”

Geoffrey Roberts, Irish Examiner:

“Monumental... For Kotkin it was not Stalin’s personality that drove his politics but his politics that shaped his personality. His research, narrative and arguments are as convincing as they are exhaustive. The book is long but very readable and highly accessible to the general reader.... Magisterial.”

Donald Rayfield, Literary Review:

“Masterful... No other work on Stalin incorporates so well the preliminary information needed by the general reader, yet challenges so thoroughly the specialist’s preconceptions. Kotkin has chosen illustrations, many of them little known, which reveal the crippled psyches of his dramatis personae.”

Booklist (starred):

“An ambitious, massive, highly detailed work that offers fresh perspectives on the collapse of the czarist regime, the rise of the Bolsheviks, and the seemingly unlikely rise of Stalin to total power over much of the Eurasian land mass....This is an outstanding beginning to what promises to be a definitive work on the Stalin era.”

Kirkus Reviews (starred):

“Authoritative and rigorous.... Staggeringly wide in scope, this work meticulously examines the structural forces that brought down one autocratic regime and put in place another.”

Publishers Weekly:

“This is an epic, thoroughly researched account that presents a broad vision of Stalin, from his birth to his rise to absolute power.”

Library Journal:

“Kotkin has been researching his magisterial biography of Stalin for a decade. Inescapably important reading.”

John Lewis Gaddis, Yale University; author of *George F. Kennan: A Life*, winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Biography:

“In its size, sweep, sensitivity, and surprises, Stephen Kotkin’s first volume on Stalin is a monumental achievement: the early life of a man we thought we knew, set against the world—no less—that he inhabited. It’s biography on an epic scale. Only Tolstoy might have matched it.”

William Taubman, Professor of Political Science Emeritus, Amherst College; author of *Khrushchev: The Man and his Era*, winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for Biography

“Stalin has had more than his fair share of biographies. But Stephen Kotkin’s wonderfully broad-gauged work surpasses them all in both breadth and depth, showing brilliantly how the man, the time, the place, its history, and especially Russian/Soviet political culture, combined to produce one of history’s greatest evil geniuses.”

David Halloway, Raymond A. Spruance Professor of International History, Stanford University; author of *Stalin and the Bomb*:

“Stephen Kotkin’s first volume on Stalin is ambitious in conception and masterly in execution. It provides a brilliant account of Stalin’s formation as a political actor up to his fateful decision to collectivize agriculture

by force. Kotkin combines biography with historical analysis in a way that brings out clearly Stalin's great political talents as well as the ruthlessness with which he applied them and the impact his policies had on Russia and the world. This is a magisterial work on the grandest scale."

Strobe Talbott, president of the Brookings Institution:

"More than any of Stalin's previous biographers, Stephen Kotkin humanizes one of the great monsters of history, thereby making the monstrosity more comprehensible than it has been before. He does so by sticking to the facts—many of them fresh, all of them marshalled into a gripping, fine-grained story."

The Sunday Times (London):

"Staggeringly researched, exhaustively thorough... Kotkin has no patience for the idea that Stalin... was a madman or a monster. His personality and crimes, Kotkin thinks, are only explicable in the wider contexts of Russian imperial history and Marxist theory. So this is less a conventional biography than a colossal life and times.... Hugely impressive."

Sheila Fitzpatrick, The Guardian:

"Unlike a number of Stalin studies, this is not an etiology of evil. The author does not appear to be watching his subject narrowly for early signs of the monstrous deformations that will later emerge. He tries to look at him at various stages of his career without the benefit of too much hindsight.... [Kotkin] is an engaging interlocutor with a sharp, irreverent wit... making the book a good read as well as an original and largely convincing interpretation of Stalin that should provoke lively arguments in the field."

About the Author

Stephen Kotkin is the John P. Birkelund Professor in History and International Affairs at Princeton University. He is also a fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. He directs Princeton's Institute for International and Regional Studies and co-directs its Program in the History and Practice of Diplomacy. His books include *Uncivil Society*, *Armageddon Averted*, and *Magnetic Mountain*. Kotkin was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for *Stalin: Volume I: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928*.

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PART 1

DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE

In all his stature he towers over Europe and Asia, over the past and the future. This is the most famous and at the same time the most unknown person in the world.

Henri Barbusse, *Stalin* (1935)

RUSSIA'S DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE NESTED across a greater expanse than that of any other state, before or since. The realm came to encompass not just the palaces of St. Petersburg and the golden domes of Moscow, but Polish and Yiddish-speaking Wilno and Warsaw, the German-founded Baltic ports of Riga and Reval, the Persian and Turkic-language oases of Bukhara and Samarkand (site of Tamerlane's tomb), and the Ainu people of Sakhalin Island near the Pacific Ocean. "Russia" encompassed the cataracts and Cossack settlements of wildly fertile Ukraine and the swamps and trappers of Siberia. It acquired borders on the Arctic and Danube, the Mongolian plateau, and Germany. The Caucasus barrier, too, was breached and folded in, bringing Russia onto the Black and Caspian seas, and giving it borders with Iran and the Ottoman empire. Imperial Russia came to resemble a religious kaleidoscope with a plenitude of Orthodox churches,

mosques, synagogues, Old Believer prayer houses, Catholic cathedrals, Armenian Apostolic churches, Buddhist temples, and shaman totems. The empire's vast territory served as a merchant's paradise, epitomized by the slave markets on the steppes and, later, the crossroad fairs in the Volga valley. Whereas the Ottoman empire stretched over parts of three continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa), some observers in the early twentieth century imagined that the two-continent Russian imperium was neither Europe nor Asia but a third entity unto itself: Eurasia. Be that as it may, what the Venetian ambassador to the Sublime Porte (Agosto Nani) had once said of the Ottoman realm—"more a world than a state"—applied no less to Russia. Upon that world, Stalin's rule would visit immense upheaval, hope, and grief.

Stalin's origins, in the Caucasus market and artisan town of Gori, were exceedingly modest—his father was a cobbler, his mother, a washerwoman and seamstress—but in 1894 he entered an Eastern Orthodox theological seminary in Tiflis, the grandest city of the Caucasus, where he studied to become a priest. If in that same year a subject of the Russian empire had fallen asleep and awoken thirty years later, he or she would have been confronted by multiple shocks. By 1924 something called a telephone enabled near instantaneous communication over vast distances. Vehicles moved without horses. Humans flew in the sky. X-rays could see inside people. A new physics had dreamed up invisible electrons inside atoms, as well as the atom's disintegration in radioactivity, and one theory stipulated that space and time were interrelated and curved. Women, some of whom were scientists, flaunted newfangled haircuts and clothes, called fashions. Novels read like streams of dreamlike consciousness, and many celebrated paintings depicted only shapes and colors.¹ As a result of what was called the Great War (1914–18), the almighty German kaiser had been deposed and Russia's two big neighboring nemeses, the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, had disappeared. Russia itself was mostly intact, but it was ruled by a person of notably humble origins who also hailed from the imperial borderlands.² To our imaginary thirty-year Rip Van Winkle in 1924, this circumstance—a plebeian and a Georgian having assumed the mantle of the tsars—could well have been the greatest shock of all.

Stalin's ascension to the top from an imperial periphery was uncommon but not unique. Napoleone di Buonaparte had been born the second of eight children in 1769 on Corsica, a Mediterranean island annexed only the year before by France; that annexation (from the Republic of Genoa) allowed this young man of modest privilege to attend French military schools. Napoleon (in the French spelling) never lost his Corsican accent, yet he rose to become not only a French general but, by age thirty-five, hereditary emperor of France. The plebeian Adolf Hitler was born entirely outside the country he would dominate: he hailed from the Habsburg borderlands, which had been left out of the 1871 German unification. In 1913, at age twenty-four, he relocated from Austria-Hungary to Munich, just in time, it turned out, to enlist in the imperial German army for the Great War. In 1923, Hitler was convicted of high treason for what came to be known as the Munich Beer Hall Putsch, but a German nationalist judge, ignoring the applicable law, refrained from deporting the non-German citizen. Two years later, Hitler surrendered his Austrian citizenship and became stateless. Only in 1932 did he acquire German citizenship, when he was naturalized on a pretext (nominally, appointed as a "land surveyor" in Braunschweig, a Nazi party electoral stronghold). The next year Hitler was named chancellor of Germany, on his way to becoming dictator. By the standards of a Hitler or a Napoleon, Stalin grew up as an unambiguous subject of his empire, Russia, which had annexed most of Georgia fully seventy-seven years before his birth. Still, his leap from the lowly periphery was improbable.

Stalin's dictatorial regime presents daunting challenges of explanation. His power of life and death over every single person across eleven time zones—more than 200 million people at prewar peak—far exceeded anything wielded by tsarist Russia's greatest autocrats. Such power cannot be discovered in the biography of the young Soso Jughashvili. Stalin's dictatorship, as we shall see, was a product of immense structural forces: the evolution of Russia's autocratic political system; the Russian empire's conquest of the Caucasus; the tsarist regime's recourse to a secret police and entanglement in terrorism; the European castle-in-the-air project of socialism; the underground conspiratorial nature of Bolshevism (a mirror image of repressive

tsarism); the failure of the Russian extreme right to coalesce into a fascism despite all the ingredients; global great-power rivalries, and a shattering world war. Without all of this, Stalin could never have gotten anywhere near power. Added to these large-scale structural factors were contingencies such as the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II during wartime, the conniving miscalculations of Alexander Kerensky (the last head of the Provisional Government that replaced the tsar in 1917), the actions and especially inactions of Bolshevism's many competitors on the left, Lenin's many strokes and his early death in January 1924, and the vanity and ineptitude of Stalin's Bolshevik rivals.

Consider further that the young Jughashvili could have died from smallpox, as did so many of his neighbors, or been carried off by the other fatal diseases that were endemic in the slums of Batum and Baku, where he agitated for socialist revolution. Competent police work could have had him sentenced to forced labor (*katorga*) in a silver mine, where many a revolutionary met an early death. Jughashvili could have been hanged by the authorities in 1906–7 as part of the extrajudicial executions in the crackdown following the 1905 revolution (more than 1,100 were hanged in 1905–6).³ Alternatively, Jughashvili could have been murdered by the innumerable comrades he cuckolded. If Stalin had died in childhood or youth, that would not have stopped a world war, revolution, chaos, and likely some form of authoritarianism redux in post-Romanov Russia. And yet the determination of this young man of humble origins to make something of himself, his cunning, his honing of organizational talents would help transform the entire structural landscape of the early Bolshevik revolution from 1917. Stalin brutally, artfully, indefatigably built a personal dictatorship within the Bolshevik dictatorship. Then he launched and saw through a bloody socialist remaking of the entire former empire, presided over a victory in the greatest war in human history, and took the Soviet Union to the epicenter of global affairs. More than for any other historical figure, even Gandhi or Churchill, a biography of Stalin, as we shall see, eventually comes to approximate a history of the world.

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WORLD HISTORY IS DRIVEN BY GEOPOLITICS. Among the great powers, the British empire, more than any other state, shaped the world in modern times. Between 1688 and 1815, the French fought the British for global supremacy. Despite France's greater land mass and population, Britain emerged the winner, mostly thanks to a superior, lean, fiscal-military state.⁴ By the final defeat of Napoleon, which was achieved in a coalition, the British were the world's dominant power. Their ascendancy, moreover, coincided with China's decline under the Qing dynasty, rendering British power—political, military, industrial, cultural, and fiscal—genuinely global. The felicitous phrase “the sun never sets” that was used to describe the extent of the empire's holdings originated in connection with the earlier empire of Spain, but the saying was applied, and stuck, to the British. In the 1870s, however, two ruptures occurred in the British-dominated world: Prince Otto von Bismarck's unification of Germany, realized on the battlefield by Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, which, in lightning fashion, led to the appearance of a surpassing new power on the European continent; and the Meiji restoration in Japan, which imparted tremendous drive to a new power in East Asia. All of a sudden, imperial Russia faced the world's most dynamic new power on its restive western border, and Asia's most dynamic on its underpopulated eastern border. Russia had entered a new world. This was the world into which Stalin was born.

Even the package of attributes that we call modernity was a result not of some inherent sociological process, a move out of tradition, but of a vicious geopolitical competition in which a state had to match the other great powers in modern steel production, modern militaries, and a modern, mass-based political system, or be crushed and potentially colonized.⁵ These were challenges that confronted conservative establishments especially. Everyone knows that Karl Marx, the radical German journalist and philosopher, loomed over imperial Russia like over no other place. But for most of Stalin's lifetime, it was another German—and a conservative—who loomed over the Russian empire: Otto von Bismarck. A country squire from a Protestant Junker family in eastern Brandenburg who had attended the University of Gottingen, joined a

Burschenschaften (fraternity), and was known as a solid drinker and devotee of the female of the species, Bismarck had held no administrative posts as late as 1862, although he had been ambassador to Russia and to France. But in fewer than ten years, he had risen to become the Iron Chancellor and, using Prussia as his base, forged a mighty new country. Prussia, the proverbial “army in search of a nation,” had found one. At the same time, the rightist German chancellor showed rulers everywhere how to uphold modern state power by cultivating a broader political base, developing heavy industry, introducing social welfare, and juggling alliances with and against an array of other ambitious great powers.

Bismarck the statesman was one for the ages. He craftily upended his legions of opponents, both outside and inside the German principalities, and instigated three swift, decisive, yet limited wars to crush Denmark, then Austria, then France, but he kept the state of Austria-Hungary on the Danube for the sake of the balance of power. He created pretexts to attack when in a commanding position or baited the other countries into launching the wars after he had isolated them diplomatically. He made sure to have alternatives, and played these alternatives off against each other. That said, Bismarck had had no master plan for German unity—his enterprise was an improvisation, driven partly by domestic political considerations (to tame the liberals in Prussia’s parliament). But he had constantly worked circumstances and luck to supreme advantage, breaking through structural limitations, creating new realities on the ground. “Politics is less a science than an art,” Bismarck would say. “It is not a subject that can be taught. One must have the talent for it. Even the best advice is of no avail if improperly carried out.”⁶ He further spoke of politics in terms of cards, dice, and other games of chance. “One can be as shrewd as the shrewdest in this world and still at any moment go like a child into the dark,” Bismarck had remarked on the victory in the war he instigated in 1864 against Denmark.⁷ This he complained was “a thankless job. . . . One has to reckon with a series of probabilities and improbabilities and base one’s plans upon this reckoning.” Bismarck did not invoke virtue, but only power and interests. Later this style of rule would become known as *realpolitik*, a term coined by August von Rochau (1810-73), a German National Liberal disappointed in the failure to break through to a constitution in 1848. In its origins, *realpolitik* signified effective practical politics to realize idealistic aims. Bismarck’s style was more akin to the term *raison d’etat*: calculating, amoral reason of state. Instead of principles, there were objectives; instead of morality, means.⁸ Bismarck was widely hated until he proved brilliantly successful, then lionized beyond reason for having smashed France, made a vassal out of Austria, and united Germany.

Bismarck went on to form the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy (1882) and sign a secret “reinsurance treaty” with Russia (1888), extracting neutrality in the event of a conflict, thereby obviating a possible two-front war against France and Russia and accentuating the new Germany’s mastery of the continent. His gifts were those of the inner sanctum. He did not possess a strong voice or self-confidence in speaking, and did not spend much time amid the public. Moreover, he was not the ruler: he served at the pleasure of the king (and then kaiser), Wilhelm I. In that all-important relationship, Bismarck showed psychological skill and tenacity, ceaselessly, efficaciously manipulating Wilhelm I, threatening his resignation, pulling all manner of histrionics. Wilhelm I, for his part, proved to be a diligent, considerate, and intelligent monarch, with the smarts to defer to Bismarck on policy and to attend to the myriad feathers his Iron Chancellor ruffled.⁹ Bismarck strategized to make himself indispensable partly by making everything as complex as possible, so that he alone knew how things worked (this became known as his combinations). He had so many balls up in the air at all times that he could never stop scrambling to prevent any from dropping, even as he was tossing up still more. It must also be kept in mind that Bismarck enjoyed the benefit of the world’s then-best land army (and perhaps second-best navy).

Other would-be statesmen across Europe went to school with Bismarck’s example of “politics as art.”¹⁰ To be sure, from the perspective of London, which had well-established rule of law, Bismarck appeared as a menace. But from the perspective of St. Petersburg, where the challenges were finding a bulwark against leftist extremism, he looked like salvation. From any vantage point, his aggrandizement of Prussia via a

German unification—without the support of a mass movement, with no significant previous experience of government, and against an array of formidable interests—ranks among the greatest diplomatic achievements by any leader in the last two centuries.¹¹ Moreover, paying indirect homage to a ruler he had vanquished, France's Napoleon III, Bismarck introduced universal manhood suffrage, banking conservatives' political fortunes on the peasants' German nationalism to afford dominance of parliament. "If Mephistopheles climbed up the pulpit and read the Gospel, could anyone be inspired by this prayer?" huffed a newspaper of Germany's outflanked liberals. What is more, Bismarck goaded Germany's conservatives to agree to broad social welfare legislation, outflanking the socialists, too. What made Bismarck's unification feat still more momentous was the added circumstance that the newly unified Germany soon underwent a phenomenal economic surge. Seemingly overnight the country vaulted past the world's number one power, Great Britain, in key modern industries such as steel and chemicals. As Britain became consumed with its (relative) "decline," the new Bismarckian Reich pushed to realign the world order. Germany was "like a great boiler," one Russian observed, "developing surplus steam at extreme speed, for which an outlet is required."¹² As we shall see, Russia's establishment—or, at least, its more able elements—became obsessed with Bismarck. Not one but two Germans, Bismarck and Marx, constituted imperial Russia's other double-headed eagle.

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