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Contents

Introduction by Mark Edele, University of Melbourne ................................................................. 2
Review by Wendy Z. Goldman, Carnegie Mellon University ........................................................... 6
Review by Jonathan Haslam, University of Cambridge, emeritus ................................................. 11
Review by Joshua Rubenstein, Harvard University ........................................................................ 14
Review by David R. Shearer, University of Delaware ................................................................. 18
Review by Alfred Rieber, Central European University, emeritus ........................................... 23
Introduction by Mark Edele, University of Melbourne

The Soviet Union’s Second World War, once the more or less exclusive domain of narrowly defined military historians, has become one of the most crowded sub-fields of Soviet history. Alfred Rieber’s *Stalin as Warlord* is a welcome and level-headed intervention into this at times combative field.¹

The reviews assembled here all highlight the depth of Rieber’s scholarship. Jonathan Haslam notes how Rieber’s “very long career” enabled him to write a “very readable book;” David Shearer helpfully puts the book into the context of Rieber’s larger oeuvre; Joshua Rubenstein locates it in the historiography on Stalin at war; and Wendy Goldman underscores that his “lifetime of research” allows Rieber to wade “confidently into the currents of contemporary controversies.”

*Stalin as Warlord* is a superb example of the most difficult of historical genres: the one-volume synthesis. It presents a narrative of Joseph Stalin’s Second World War which brings together the insights of a vast secondary literature with a wide array of primary sources accumulated over decades. Such a book, of course, is necessarily selective. Nevertheless, Goldman would have liked more social history and challenges Rieber’s interpretation, based on William Moskoff’s 1990 book, of the role of the Soviet state in feeding the population.² Haslam, by contrast, would have welcomed engagement with the Comintern archive and newly released documents on foreign policy to 1941. Whether both critiques could have been addressed without exploding the size of the book is, however, questionable.

Other concerns relate to title and argument. Is “warlord” a good term for Stalin in World War II? Maybe not, as Goldman argues.³ But then, authors do not always have control over the title their publishers choose to sell the product, and Rieber’s narrative does not really dwell on the question of warlordism at all.⁴

“Paradox,” by contrast, is a central part of Rieber’s argument. Rieber diagnoses “deep contradictions between Stalin’s creative and destructive impulses, which combined to produce a paradox of power” (1). Using a term from rhetoric to talk about the social and political world has a distinguished pedigree: Hegel used “dialectic” to talk, not about the logic of an argument, but the logic of history; and Marxists, as latter-day Hegelians, quite like to talk about “contradictions,” as if society were a scholarly dispute.⁵ So “paradox” is in good company. But what might this particular claim mean? In what way did Stalin’s actions during World War II resemble “reasoning based on seemingly true assumptions that [led] to a contradiction (or other obviously false conclusion)?”⁶ Was his logic faulty, or the assumptions on which it was based? Maybe “paradox” is too august a term to deal with Stalin’s inconsistencies, his tactical flexibility, and the contradictions inherent in the

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¹ See, for example, the H-Diplo Roundtable on Sean McMeekin’s *Stalin’s War: A New History of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2021), H-Diplo roundtable XXIV-5 (26 September 2022) [https://hdiplo.org/to/RT24-5](https://hdiplo.org/to/RT24-5).
⁴ In 268 pages of text, Rieber uses the term exactly four times: 6, 134, 266, 268.
strange situation of a Marxist running a multi-national empire? Maybe the more humble “inconsistency” or “contradiction” would do? Or maybe Alec Nove’s more technical term: “mish-mash” (235)?

Whatever we call such incongruities, they were abundant in the Soviet Second World War. Stalin’s pre-war militarization drive produced huge stockpiles of weapons, many of which were technologically obsolete when the Germans attacked, with most of them destroyed in the first half year of the war; the same militarization drive produced the basis for the wartime economy which would put Nazi Germany out of action. Collectivization did not produce the grain reserves that Stalin knew he needed to win a war, and the resulting unproductive agricultural system contributed to wartime food shortages; but the subjugation of the peasantry ensured that whatever there was could be directed to cities and the army, contributing decisively to the survival of Stalin’s regime. The Red Army was quite inefficient compared to other militaries at the time, and yet it won the war in Europe.

Stalin was the overall manager of the war effort and all the sinews of power converged in his position at the head of the State Defense Committee (GKO), which was created in 1941; and yet, his very ability to run the war relied on de-centralization of power: to his lieutenants, who served as trouble shooters, and to regional and local party secretaries, who ran their own fiefs quite independent from the centre.

There might be genius in using “paradox” rather than its humbler cousins to describe such intricacies. It inspires readers to think about the complexities of the Soviet war effort. Shearer sees “paradox” as Stalin’s great strength: his flexibility in mixing repression and terror with rehabilitation and accommodation might well have ensured his long-term survival as “one of the most ‘successful’ of the twentieth-century despots.” Goldman’s review focuses instead on the “contradictions” inherent in the Soviet social structure and on the constraints on the dictator. Stalin’s inconsistencies appear less as the idiosyncrasies of one of the most powerful men in the world but as the expression, maybe even the embodiment, of underlying social forces.

Rubenstein expresses dissatisfaction with such messiness. He locates it not in historical reality but in Rieber’s “at times inconsistent” analysis. Stalin’s overall strategy of yanking the Russian empire into a Bolshevik type of regimented industrial modernity in the 1930s could not have produced a “military power comparable to Germany” at the same time as his diplomatic miscalculations left the country terribly exposed. One and the same man could not have gotten his long-term strategy right while simultaneously mangling up his short-term tactics.

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13 Rieber agrees in part: Stalin was a “decisive element” but he responded “to underlying structural problems…deeply rooted in the country’s geography, economy and society” (132).
However, Stalin, that “bundle of contradictions” (116), did just that, as Rieber shows. And he would continue to make mistakes while leading the Soviet Union to victory and to superpower status.

In his careful reply, Rieber addresses all these critiques and more. He begins with the suggestion that Stalin was “paranoid.” His answer rhymes well with Goldstein’s focus on wider social processes. The term, Rieber argues, personalizes too much of what indeed might have been wider social, political, geopolitical, and historical forces, which to some extent might have been reproduced in Russia’s President Vladimir Putin’s approach to the world. Rieber also addresses the limits of the term paradox, replies to the suggestion he did not engage with social history deeply enough, and defends his use of “warlord” as “more than ‘a catchy phrase’.” He replies to the charge that he does not sufficiently stress the role of ideology, among other critiques. In the final paragraph Rieber reflects on the contemporary memories of this war in the region once dominated by Stalin’s Soviet Union. Like Haslam, he thus points to the fact that we are still dealing with the aftershocks of Stalin’s flawed success.

Contributors:

Alfred J. Rieber is University Professor Emeritus at the Central European University, where he was chair of History for four years, and Professor Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania where he was chair of History for ten years. Author of numerous works in Russian and Soviet History, his Struggle over the Eurasian Borderlands from the Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War (Cambridge University Press, 2014) won the Bentley Prize of the World History Association, and his work Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia (Cambridge University Press, 2016) was short-listed for the Pushkin Prize in Russian History. His most recent work is Storms over the Balkans during the Second World War (Oxford University Press, 2022).

Mark Edele is Hansen Professor in History and Deputy Dean of Arts at the University of Melbourne. His latest books include Stalin’s Defectors: How Red Army Soldiers became Hitler’s Collaborators, 1941-1945 (Oxford University Press, 2017, paperback 2019), Stalinism at War: The Soviet Union in World War II (Bloomsbury, 2021, paperback 2023), and Russia’s War against Ukraine: The Whole Story (Melbourne University Press, 2023).

Wendy Z. Goldman, a social and political historian of the Soviet Union, is the Paul Mellon Distinguished Professor of History at Carnegie Mellon University. Her early work focused on women’s emancipation and industrialization. She wrote about Stalinist repression in Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin’s Russia (Cambridge University Press, 2011). Her most recent work (with Donald Filtzer), Fortress Dark and Stern: The Soviet Home Front during World War II (Oxford University Press, 2021), is the first comprehensive, archivally based study of the Soviet home front and its role in the Allied victory. She is currently working on the postwar, anti-cosmopolitan campaign.

Jonathan Haslam is now completing research on the origins of Putin’s war with Ukraine which will appear as a book in 2024. His latest work, The Specter of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II (Princeton University Press, 2020), is now available in paperback.

Joshua Rubenstein is an Associate at Harvard’s Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. His first book, Soviet Dissidents: Their Struggle for Human Rights (Beacon Press, 1980), was the first general history of the Soviet dissident movement. Tangled Loyalties (Basic Books), his biography of the controversial Soviet-Jewish writer Ilya Ehrenburg, came out in 1996. Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, (Yale University Press, 2001) received a National Jewish Book Award. He then edited The KGB File
of Andrei Sakharov (Yale University Press, 2005) and The Unknown Black Book: The Holocaust in the German-Occupied Soviet Territories (Indiana University Press, 2007). His interpretive biography of Leon Trotsky is part of the Jewish Lives Series of Yale University Press. The Last Days of Stalin (Yale University Press, 2016) is his tenth book; it is scheduled to appear in Azeri, Estonian, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, and Ukrainian.

Alfred J. Rieber’s *Stalin as Warlord* opens with the Soviet Union’s enormity of loss in the first year after the German invasion in June 1941: four out of five million soldiers lost, numerous cities and towns destroyed, vast swathes of territory conquered. Yet under Joseph Stalin’s leadership, the country “completely reequipped,” rebuilt the Red Army, and defeated the Wehrmacht. How, Rieber asks, “can this great, almost miraculous recovery be explained?” (5–6). In this commanding and authoritative synthesis of documents and secondary literature in Russian and English, Rieber tackles the epic story of Stalin’s wartime leadership.

Rieber devotes the first section to Stalin’s preparations for war. After discussing the 1936–1938 period, which was marked by devastating repressions of the Red Army officer corps and alleged enemies in the country and on its borderlands, Rieber then surveys the fruitless diplomatic overtures at collective security, the shift toward defense production, and the August 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact. The middle section, organized chronologically and topically, describes the German invasion, the staggering losses of soldiers, equipment, and territory, and Stalin’s early missteps. Yet, as Rieber details, Stalin soon turned retreat into operational prowess, and panic into an effective wartime culture. He built bridges to the Russian Orthodox Church and the scientific and technical intelligentsia, and gave writers, artists, and musicians freedom to promote the war effort in new ways. The final section, which is captured in Rieber’s title “A Pyrrhic Victory?”, surveys the grim postwar world. The famine in 1947 hit a weakened population, and the creeping Cold War led to a new wave of repressions at home. Wartime heroes fell victim to the Leningrad Affair, a purge of Leningrad’s wartime leaders in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the choking xenophobia of the *Zhdanovshchina* and the anti-cosmopolitan campaign. The *Zhdanovshchina*, an ideological campaign launched in 1949 by Andrei A. Zhdanov, Politburo member and wartime leader, with the support of Stalin and the Central Committee, attacked various cultural figures for servility to the West, and the anti-cosmopolitan campaign initiated a purge of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and harsh discrimination against the Jewish population in the cultural, scientific/technical, medical, and educational fields.

Rieber uses the concept of paradox, which he identifies as the defining element of Stalin’s leadership, to structure the book. He writes, “The deep contradictions between Stalin’s creative and destructive impulses…combined to produce a paradox of power” (1). From the late 1920s on, Stalin was “building and dismantling a new state order” (3). Stalin saw himself as a revolutionary representative of the workers and peasants, but subjected the latter to a brutal collectivization campaign. He sought to strengthen the country for war, but repressed its industrial and military leaders. His miscalculations about German dictator Adolf Hitler resulted in great losses, but his subsequent success in mobilization was critical to the victory. He centralized power to an unprecedented degree, but delegated plenipotentiary powers to leaders at every level. These paradoxes are still expressed today in the sharp divisions between Stalin’s critics and his supporters, arraying those who condemn him as “brutal dictator” against those who celebrate him as “a great modernizer” and “triumphal leader” (1).

One of the greatest paradoxes of Stalin’s leadership, which Rieber captures with particular poignancy through the tragedy of Marshal Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky, was the purge of the military in the late 1930s. Tukhachevsky, who was among the most imaginative and brilliant of the senior officers, advanced ideas about “deep operations” and tank warfare that presaged the Wehrmacht’s blazing *blitzkrieg*. Yet Stalin approved the execution of Tukhachevsky and other senior commanders for allegedly conspiring with fascist Germany to overthrow Soviet power. The decimation of the officer corps stands as one of the most stunning and incomprehensible paradoxes of Stalin’s preparations for war. According to Rieber, “the absence of a command group that shared a history of working together” paralyzed the military and played a major role in the country’s initial defeats (119). Yet Rieber also notes that Marshal Kliment, Ye. Voroshilov, and Marshal Semyon M. Budenny, two Civil War heroes who did share a long history of working together, proved among the weakest of the military leaders and were soon replaced by other, more effective officers. Was this “history
of working together” perhaps less important than Rieber maintains? Should the rapid recovery of the officer corps change our assessment of the impact, if not the senseless brutality, of the purge?¹

Rieber stresses the paradox of repression in other spheres as well. Stalin subjected the Comintern to a debilitating purge. He accused Party members in the republics of nationalist deviations precisely at the point that their resistance against fascism was most needed. He approved repeated purges of the Ukrainian Party organization that ultimately benefited the pro-Nazi Ukrainian nationalists (65-66). He executed many committed, anti-fascist fighters in the Belarussian Party organization. His purge of the Polish Communist Party facilitated its infiltration by the Polish secret police, and his decimation of the Baltic Communist parties destroyed any possibility of turning their countries into defensive bulwarks against the Nazis (72, 77-8). In Rieber’s view, the mass murder of staunch anti-fascists on the eve of the German invasion deeply damaged the possibilities for resistance (82).

Rieber’s conception of paradox also frames Stalin’s conduct during the war. He imposed ruthless mobilization campaigns, but garnered broad popular support. He purged various national groups for treason, but encouraged national traditions as a source of soviet-wide patriotism. He centered power in his own hands, but entrusted other leaders with vast responsibilities. He allowed Party organs to atrophy, while giving great power to certain commissariats (103, 104). He combined “super-centralization” with “greater freedom to improvise and experiment at the local level” (115). He decimated the prewar army, but then rebuilt it through new traditions, rituals, medals, and rewards that glorified the common soldiers and their commanders. Despite his brutalities, he became an immensely popular leader.

By the war’s end, the paradoxes of Stalin’s leadership grew more pronounced. Russo-centrism conflicted with Soviet patriotism, and republic leaders were disciplined for glorifying prerevolutionary warriors who fought against tsarist Russia. Although Stalin emerged from the war at the peak of his power and prestige, he was exhausted and worn out by the long struggle. He “dashed the hope nurtured by wide sections of the population” and returned to his preferred methods of rule: coercion and repression (224, 213). Rieber assumes that Stalin willfully rejected a viable liberal, democratic alternative, and perhaps this was so. But Rieber does not discuss the fact that the hopes for change of various groups were often at odds. While peasants, for example, hoped for freer markets, urban wage earners hoped for a steady supply of subsidized food. The interests and needs of these two groups clashed, much as they did in the 1920s. The country was devastated by war, and the demands of reconstruction excluded expanded investment in light industry and consumption. In short, Stalin, whatever his innate proclivity toward brutality, faced many of the same pressures of capital accumulation that the Party struggled to resolve in the late 1920s and 1930s.²

Rieber locates the conflict between Stalin’s creative and destructive impulses in his personality, which was formed by the conspiratorial, prerevolutionary underground and the West’s subsequent hostility to the young Soviet state. Stalin was a prodigious organizer with a keen understanding of politics. Perhaps most importantly, he was flexible. When collective security failed, he signed the Nazi-Soviet and Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pacts. He remained deeply preoccupied with the dangers of capitalist encirclement from the cordon sanitaire imposed after the First World War to the post-Second World War settlements of Eastern Europe. His greatest fear, according to Rieber, was a potential link between domestic opposition forces and foreign


enemies (21). This fear motivated the Moscow Show Trials and the mass and national operations of 1937–1938, the wartime deportation of suspect populations, and the postwar purges of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and Leningrad’s wartime leaders. Stalin often undercut the contributions of scientists with unfounded suspicions about their loyalty, and tended to support practical rather than the theoretical work. “Only by the slightest of margins” did nuclear physics survive the ideological attacks that destroyed biology and genetics (153). Although Stalin often made decisions based on impulse rather than socialist planning, Rieber acknowledges that he faced challenges that were not easily resolved: a multi-national, economically undeveloped agrarian nation of vast expanse with no natural geographic frontiers, and with vulnerable borderlands.

Rieber dispels many of the myths surrounding Stalin, including those manufactured by his successor, Nikita Khrushchev. Stalin did not fall apart in the first days after the invasion, as Khrushchev claimed. On the contrary, his appointment book, uncovered in the archives, reveals that he remained an active, vigorous leader. Nor did he plan military strategy, as Khrushchev alleged, “on a globe,” but rather had a sophisticated understanding of operational maps and matters (117). Stalin’s chief commanders were “impressed by his analytical keenness,” “his unhurried manner, his attentiveness, rapid response to questions, and ability to summarize a discussion and arrive at a concise and penetrating conclusion” (117). Unlike Hitler, his skills as a military commander improved steadily over time. He intimidated his generals, but at the same time “won their respect with his phenomenal memory, grasp of details, and iron will” (115). He worked sixteen-hour days.

Buoyed by a lifetime of research, Rieber wades confidently into the currents of contemporary controversies. In Rieber’s view, Stalin signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact not because he trusted Hitler or viewed the capitalist democracies as the greater threat, but because he sought to buy time to strengthen the country’s defenses (11). Nor, as some historians argue, did he fail to prepare for war.3 He ramped up armaments production and reoriented industry toward defense. While historians vary about the impact of repression on the Red Army’s performance, Rieber ascribes great significance to its role in the country’s failure to take full advantage of the Pact, and for the Red Army’s initial defeats (133, 123). He largely discounts Roger Reese’s data on the mitigating impact of reinstatements, and Evan Mawdsley’s assertion that the majority of middle-rank commanders remained untouched (33, 23).4 On the question of whether Stalin was surprised by the German attack on 22 June 1941, Rieber holds that Stalin expected an attack, but miscalculated its timing. He signed the Pact precisely because he expected an attack and understood the need to ready the country for war. Yet he failed to credit the accurate intelligence he received, because he did not believe that Hitler would fight a two-front war (56).

Contrary to those who argue that Stalin was lulled by the Pact into inaction, Rieber shows that he used the time to reorganize and modernize the army, convert industry to defense, increase investment in heavy industry, and churn out tanks. These efforts stood the country in good stead. On the eve of the war, “the Soviet Union had achieved the rank of a world military power comparable to Germany, out of all proportion to its general economic development” (46). Stalin failed to bring divisional forces up to full combat readiness not because he “trusted” Hitler, but because he feared that doing so would provoke an attack. Rieber notes great popular support for the war effort, bolstered by an outpouring of expressive music, journalism, poetry, and art, but his analysis of its sources is less clear. Given Rieber’s considerable emphasis on repression—of the armed forces, peasantry, intelligentsia, nationalities, communists, and the Church—it is difficult to

3 See, for example, David Murphy, What Stalin Knew (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005); Gabriel Gorodetsky, Grand Delusion. Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001).
understand why so many people rallied around Stalin and remained deeply loyal to him. Was it Russian nationalism, Soviet patriotism, hatred for the invader, commitment to Soviet socialism, or anti-fascism? Fear of arrest or punishment? In the absence of more social history, the book’s answers are not definitive.

As in any book of such impressive scope, there are a few weaknesses. The concept of paradox, while an excellent framing device, has its limits as an analytical tool. As a descriptive strategy, it enables Rieber to show the contradictions in Stalin’s policies: on the one hand, Stalin did this, on the other, he did that. And the paradoxes are striking. Yet description is not a substitute for analysis. Rieber sees Stalin’s paradoxical policies as an expression of his personality, which melded paranoia and rationality. Yet he also suggests more complicated explanations. He offers plenty of evidence of constraints on Stalin’s actions: economic challenges which defied liberal democratic solutions, dueling central and regional powers, resurgent national claims. Rieber notes, for example, that despite the efforts of the Soviet secret police agency (Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del, or NKVD) to eliminate the rightwing nationalist parties in the Baltics in 1940–41, many members went underground and then surfaced after the invasion to attack the retreating Red Army and assist in the murder of the Jewish population (92). A similar pattern of rightwing fascist collaboration emerged in Belarus and Ukraine. Were these prewar repressions an expression of Stalin’s paranoia, or did Stalin understand the situation quite realistically? The postwar allegations of Lavrentii P. Beria, Deputy Prime Minister and head of the organs of state security, that Leningrad’s wartime leaders sought to promote Russia as a base to challenge Soviet central power, appear spurious, but it is not lost on the reader that Boris N. Yeltsin, president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), used precisely this strategy to great effect some 40 years later in promoting the dissolution of the USSR. In short, how many of the threats that Stalin faced were invented, how many real?

Rieber excludes important home front policies from his treatment of Stalin’s wartime leadership, although it is difficult to separate the mobilization and contribution of workers and peasants from the Red Army’s successes on battlefield. The home front population made sacrifices and even starved to provide the soldiers with the equipment and food they needed to win. What role did Stalin play in successfully mobilizing the home front? Although Rieber describes the panic on the front lines in the immediate wake of the invasion, he does little to analyze the role of the Soviet for Evacuation, the state body responsible for moving the industrial base and millions of people to the east, as a stabilizing alternative. After the evacuation and relocation of the industrial base, labor mobilization became critical to staffing the economy. Yet Rieber does not discuss the organizational body responsible, the Committee to Enumerate and Distribute the Labor Force. In regard to food policy, he concludes that the Soviet government left the people to “fend for themselves” (112), but in fact the Commissariat of Trade played a leading role in feeding the urban population, and central state stocks were responsible for the vast majority of the calories consumed. In short, we have Stalin and ‘the state,’ but few concrete governmental bodies. Actual governance on the home front, which was so essential to Stalin’s wartime leadership, receives little attention.

Finally, the term “warlord” can be loosely used to describe any military commander (perhaps even an American president?), but is most applicable to one who exercises military, economic, and political control over a region without a strong national government, through coercive control over the armed forces. Stalin, however, seems a poor candidate for the title, however catchy it may be. First, as Rieber repeatedly shows,

Stalin headed an immensely powerful national government. Indeed, it reached the height of its power over labor, the food supply, industry, the armed forces, and entire population groups during the war. Second, although Stalin exercised coercive power over the armed forces, replacing and even executing officers at will, he also gave commanders greater latitude for decision-making and invested the armed forces with more prestige, autonomy, and power than they hitherto possessed. Coercion was far from the only weapon in Stalin’s armory. Third, the national government, from the State Planning Committee (Gosplan) to the industrial commissariats to the local soviets, proved itself able to overcome wartime losses and deprivations that sparked riots, rebellion, and even revolutions in other times and places.

These are but minor points. A story of such intensity and scale would test the most erudite and gifted narrator, but Rieber’s mastery of the literature, deep knowledge of international relations, and lifetime of scholarly engagement equip him well for the challenge. This sweeping and authoritative synthesis, written in vibrant and moving prose, is an enormous contribution to the scholarship on the topic, and a must-read for anyone interested in the major events of the war and their consequences. And as Rieber notes so presciently in the last lines of his epilogue, Stalin’s leadership and the consequences of the war continue to mark Russia (and the former Soviet republics) to the present.
Review by Jonathan Haslam, University of Cambridge, emeritus

Alfred Rieber has mustered his thoughts and findings from the perspective of a very long career—nearly seven decades in the field—in focusing his very readable book on the Joseph Stalin era. It may not have the depth of minutiae and bold flashes of judgement that one can find in Stephen Kotkin’s multi-volume biography of Stalin, and it does not rely on the most recent archival openings from Russia—neither the Comintern archives nor the thousands of entirely new documents on foreign policy leading up to June 1941, all online—which President Vladimir Putin recently had declassified, and to which he referred in the run up to his war against Ukraine as justification for mistrusting the democracies. But one great advantage of sustained attention over the decades is that it does lend itself to a carefully measured balancing of the evidence that Rieber adduces to his arguments. And one does not expect to come across a new book from someone who once had dinner in Moscow with Ivy Litvinova, the widow of Maxim Litvinov, the former people’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs under Stalin (1930-1939).

This anecdote sheds unusual light on what prompted this work: the paradox that some like Litvinova who survived Stalin were self-evidently unconventional outsiders. But, of course, Stalin found nothing threatening in her, unlike Polina Zhemchuzhina, Molotov’s wife, who was a fervent Zionist. And it is widely assumed that Stalin allowed Litvinov to survive in case the time came when a settlement with the West was necessary. Whereas Soviet diplomat Boris Shtein was found to have a portrait of Stalin on his desk after he died, Litvinov had one of Roosevelt. He was not going anywhere, and Ivy was not much more to Stalin than a chatterbox.

On the issue of Stalin and war, inevitably comparisons with the present are hard to avoid, even though the manuscript appears to have been completed before Putin’s campaign against Ukraine began. (It would be a help to historians if Western publishers copied Russian standard practice in giving the exact date copy went to print.) Rieber does compare Stalin with Putin, but he suggests that Putin identifies with Stalin as a maker of foreign policy rather than as a military strategist (267). What Stalin did was to close off the Soviet Union from any kind of ideological penetration from outside. Putin, given the advances in communications technology, even with a smaller base to protect, could never achieve this. Thus, neighbouring Ukraine, infected by the West and a large potential source of transmission, was seen as a mortal threat to Putin’s authoritarianism, certainly by 2014.

If Putin’s aim since election to office in 2000 has been to ensure that Ukraine never enters NATO (nor the EU as a halfway house), Stalin would likely as not have taken decisive action decades before, having modernised his armed forces for this purpose to a degree that Putin never envisaged. Indeed, the poor performance of Russian forces on the battlefield in Ukraine reflects the continued low order of priority given to the Ministry of Defence since Putin came to office; certainly up to the Syrian expedition in September 2015 (the Crimea annexation was the work of special forces). So the comparison between Stalin and Putin

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that Rieber invites is worth making, because it puts into broader historical perspective the current problem we are now facing, in that Putin spent two decades via diplomacy trying to avert what otherwise seemed inevitable and, because of his failed military offensive, he has had to send his bad tempered Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov back onto the road to find allies who will save his bacon.

Stalin, of course, spent years building up the might of the new Red Army, only to decapitate it because the military (mainly, but not only, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky) became a serious potential threat to his own autocracy (32). As a result, Stalin’s own attempt at pre-emption, against Finland in late November 1939 (36), was as disastrous as Putin’s against Ukraine in February 2022. But Stalin emerged from his disaster by doubling up on military capability from his vast reserves, and only obtained a Western alliance reluctantly through force of circumstance: the German invasion (87). Putin does not have that option, given that Stalin’s hold on the population was both ideological and totalitarian.

These events are narrated by Rieber, a serious Russianist, without the compulsion from the right to resort to extravagant conspiracy theories concerning Stalin’s responsibility for the war. Moreover, on the domestic front there are some startling aperçus in the text, such as Rieber’s comment on the bureaucratic build-up under Stalin, which had strikingly little to do with the Weberian model, given the reign of terror. “Instead of a gradual and orderly introduction of a rational order based on merit,” Rieber writes, “the recruitment and in-house training of the new generation of Soviet bureaucrats proceeded in a cyclonic atmosphere” (57). Of course, Stalin was not German; though, come to think of it, neither was Germany’s Adolf Hitler.

Rieber’s early career began when the Cold War was very much in evidence, John Foster Dulles was still an anti-Communist missionary as the US Secretary of State, and détente had not seriously yet been seen as a practicable option; these were the years of the “missile gap,” when schoolchildren had to “duck and cover” under their desks as practice for a nuclear attack. Rieber’s narrative tends to skirt around the sensitive issue of ideology. What about Marxism-Leninism? How far was the Soviet Union under Stalin still a revolutionary state? E.H. Carr was once asked why he called his summary text The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin, 1917–1929 (London: Macmillan, 1979) instead of The Bolshevik Revolution. He retorted that the régime was no longer Bolshevik. In other words, under Stalin Russia had lost its revolutionary impulse; something that even Lev Trotsky, though Stalin’s Russian greatest critic, refused to accept.

It is surely misleading to dismiss the central importance of the October Revolution in ruining Russia’s relations with the West, the British empire in particular. The much-stated goal of Comintern, for example, was to overthrow capitalism in the industrialised world. And in the colonial and semi-colonial world, the Comintern led the fight against the European Great Powers. In Britain’s case, this was most blatantly in China, and in the French case, Indochina. It was, to say the least, not the kind of policy designed to win friends among the Great Powers.

Rieber refers instead to what he calls “the British Foreign Service” as “agitated by the anti-Russian sentiments that pre-dated the revolution and powerfully re-enforced by such incidents as the Zinoviev Letter and the Arcos Raid in the twenties as well as the purges that came later” (55). Yet before 1917 the Foreign Office was

Watling, “Russia’s underperforming military capability may be key to its downfall,” The Guardian 18 September 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/18/russia-military-underperforming-ukraine


not anti-Russian, certainly not after 1907. Indeed, the Tsar had English as his preferred language, and British 
business did well out of Russia until 1917. Hostility from the India Office was another matter, of course. 
Relations were actually broken off with the Soviet Union because of sustained Comintern support for the 
Chinese revolution, its destruction of vital British trade and investments. There was clear evidence of 
widespread Soviet complicity in it from its outbreak in May 1925. (64-69, 69-72) And it was, crucially, the 
Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, which is barely mentioned in the text - and the imminent threat of civil war in 
France, which is not mentioned at all, that underwrote British official hostility to the Soviet Union and drove 
forward the appeasement of Nazi Germany under Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (Chapters 8 and 9). 
Were the British really so wrong in their interpretation of Stalin’s intentions? After all, he did say in 1939: 
“What would be so bad about extending the socialist system to new territories and populations as a result of 
the defeat of Poland?”6 Do we need to be told more? As the Russians proverb has it, the further you go into 
the woods, the more trees there are.

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With *Stalin as Warlord*, Alfred Rieber has taken on a daunting task: to explore Joseph Stalin’s leadership during World War II, or the Great Patriotic War, as it was called in the Soviet Union at the time and is recalled in Russia even today. His book joins a growing list of ambitious books about the Soviet dictator. Biographies by Robert Service, Simon Sebag Montefiore, and Ronald Grigor Suny have recently come out, while we await the third and final volume of Stephen Kotkin’s monumental trilogy. Sheila Fitzpatrick also contributed a study of how Stalin worked closely over many years with a Politburo that he had assembled. Over fifty years ago, the Columbia scholar Seweryn Bialer edited a substantial volume of memoirs by World War II Soviet generals, and that book was followed by noteworthy volumes by Adam Ulam and Robert Tucker. Rieber’s focus on Stalin’s wartime role, with all its tragic failings, terrifying challenges, and ultimate success, adds substantially to our understanding of the war on the Eastern Front.

The Great Patriotic War—the name itself—evokes the appeal to patriotism, and not to ideology, as the animating cry in rallying the Soviet people after the disastrous German invasion in June 1941. Rieber begins by reminding us of the scale of Stalin’s purges in the 1930s, most notably of a number of talented generals and as many as thirty thousand Red Army officers. At a time when the threat of German militarism was growing with each passing year, Stalin’s decision to decimate the leadership of the Red Army was a strategic mistake of untold magnitude. Generals like Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Iona Yakir, and Ieronim Uborevich, as Rieber makes clear, were capable, forward-looking military leaders. Tukhachevsky, in particular, was developing a broad plan for modernizing the Red Army. Rieber goes into some detail about Tukhachevsky’s priorities: he understood the need for mechanized battalions, for “integrating artillery into battlefield tactics,” and “proved the feasibility of mass parachute landings with heavy equipment” (29). At the same time, Tukhachevsky organized impressive teams of weapons designers who prepared innovative plans for the production of small arms, modern tanks, and military aircraft. But this did not prevent Stalin from targeting Tukhachevsky and others. Tukhachevsky did not survive Stalin’s suspicious and jealous nature. He was arrested, tortured, and executed. Another prominent victim was Andrei Tupolev, one of the country’s most prominent aircraft designers. He was arrested during the Great Purge of 1937, then convicted of sabotage and espionage. But he avoided execution, and by 1939 was confined to a *sharashka* in Moscow (a prison where scientists were set to work on sensitive projects), where he headed a team devoted to aircraft design. Released after the German invasion, Tupolev developed the TU-2, a dive bomber that became one of the country’s most reliable military aircraft.

For Rieber, Stalin’s paranoid style resulted from “his daily immersion in a secretive, conspiratorial world, his suffering in prisons and many years in lonely exile under harsh conditions.” He turned from being “a lively and convivial youth into a suspicious, devious, deceptive and tough-minded man.” (2) All that may have been

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true, but it can only begin to explain Stalin’s multiple acts of genocide and his self-defeating policies in the
decade before World War Two.

Rieber’s evaluation of the effect of Stalin’s decisions in the late 1930s on the initial course of the war is at
times inconsistent. The infamous Non-Aggression Pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939 may well have
seemed a necessary means to gain time, to allow the Red Army to recover while Soviet industry could build
up the country’s armaments and defenses. But Stalin’s miscalculations left the country more vulnerable than
it may have initially seemed. Relying on propaganda, Stalin convinced the population that the Red Army was
more than prepared to repulse any aggressor and effectively defend the frontiers. As Rieber comments, “The
emphasis in propaganda on the high level of military preparedness and the impressive figures on investment
in military hardware and the formation of the largest army in Europe gave the impression of invincibility”
(95).

Kremlin propaganda also targeted England, holding the British responsible for the war and not Adolf Hitler’s
Germany. The Soviet journalist Ilya Ehrenburg had reported on the Spanish Civil War for Izvestia, then stayed
in Paris and witnessed the German occupation of the city before returning to Moscow in July 1940. By March
of 1941, as he recalled in his famous memoirs Lyudi, gody, zhizn (People, Years, Life), “The news became
increasingly alarming. Since early March London had been saying that Hitler was preparing to seize the
Balkans. Our press remained unperturbed. I attended a lecture on the international situation; the lecturer gave
a circumstantial account of the predatory nature of British imperialism; I wanted to hear what he had to say
about Germany, but he did not even mention it.”

But still Stalin provided a great deal of strategic support to both Berlin and Tokyo. During the Battle of
Britain, when the British held off the German Luftwaffe, Stalin provided information about weather
conditions in the North Sea to German airmen, and permitted German war ships to seek repairs at the Soviet
naval base at Murmansk above the Arctic Circle. He also permitted Japan to send material support to
Germany by train across the whole expanse of Soviet territory. The so-called Winter War with Finland in
1939-1940 exposed the woeful condition of the Soviet military leadership, when the Red Army sustained one
setback after another against a much smaller enemy. The German High Command could not help but take
note. And then the French collapse in June 1940 exposed one of Stalin’s principle miscalculations—that the
French could successfully resist a German attack—and made it easier for Hitler to turn his attention to the
East. At the same time, the Non-Aggression Pact, by dividing Poland between Nazi Germany and the Soviet
Union, did away with a natural buffer zone, namely all of Poland, and created a common border with Nazi
Germany, making it possible for Hitler to launch a surprise attack, with an overwhelming advantage in men
and military machinery that quickly overran Soviet defenses. It is worth mentioning that when the Ehrenburg
returned to Moscow from Paris in July 1940, after witnessing the Germans enter the French capital, he did all
he could to warn the Kremlin that just as the Munich Pact of 1938 did not spare England or France from war
with Nazi Germany, so the Non-Aggression Pact would not spare the Soviet Union either. But his appeals
were ignored while party agitators continued to blame the war on the British.

Constantine Pleshakov, Stalin’s Folly: The Tragic First Ten Days of World War II on the Eastern Front (Boston: Houghton
Mifflin, 2005).
7 See Vladimir Petrov, June 22, 1941: Soviet Historians and the German Invasion (Brand: University of South
Carolina Press, 1968). This volume contains a complete translation of Alexander Nekrich’s book 22 Iyunya 1941, which
prompted the regime to ban the book and expel Nekrich from the Communist Party.
8 Joshua Rubenstein, Tangled Loyalties: The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama
Press, 1999), 184–188.
Rieber holds Stalin responsible for these miscalculations and setbacks. But then, in a startling claim, he asserts that “by the eve of war [meaning the German invasion in June 1941] the Soviet Union had achieved the rank of a world military power comparable to Germany, out of all proportion to its level of general economic development” (46). But if this was the case, then how to account for “the series of disasters” (4) that followed the German invasion? Rieber writes that “by the late autumn of 1941 Kiev had fallen, Leningrad was invested, and Moscow under attack. The magnitude of these disasters was unprecedented. Of the standing army that numbered on the eve of the war five million men, almost four million were killed, missing, or in German captivity by the end of the year. Russia had never lost so many men and surrendered so much territory in one year during the course of any war it had fought in the previous 300 years” (4). The wonder is that the country sustained even more losses throughout 1942 until finally, at Stalingrad in February 1943 and at Kursk in April, the Red Army inflicted two decisive defeats on the Wehrmacht, then proceeded to drive the Germans out of the country. Rieber is right to emphasize that “four years after the terrible defeats of 1941, a wholly new Red Army, completely re-equipped under an almost entirely different military command, destroyed the last elements of the German army, seized Hitler’s capital, and forced the Führer’s suicide” (4). How this was accomplished is the real point of Stalin as Warlord.

Rieber argues that Stalin learned from his mistakes, and that he recognized the abilities of generals like Georgy Zhukov and Alexei Antonov, giving them the necessary latitude to devise a suitable defense and strategy of counter-attack. He also reconsidered the imprisonment of men like Andrei Tupolev who, as mentioned above, were actually in prison at the time of the German invasion; Stalin released them, relied on their creative abilities to revive the production of jet fighters, tanks, and other armaments, which did much to turn the tide against Hitler’s army. Stalin also did not hesitate to compromise the Bolsheviks’ disdain for organized religion. He recognized the need to rally the country by invoking every conceivable aspect of Russian and Soviet national feeling, including the role of the Russian Orthodox Church. He also allowed for greater freedom of creative expression, encouraging the work of writers, journalists, and composers to inspire both soldiers and the broader population. Faced with setback after setback, a German occupation for as long as three years in wide areas of the country, and untold atrocities against Jews and others, the country’s population needed to be reassured, encouraged, and inspired to resist.

It is impossible to underestimate the role of the creative intelligentsia in the war effort. Ilya Ehrenburg, Vasily Grossman, and Konstantin Simonov became the most widely read journalists in the country, rallying the troops and the Soviet people in the face of German atrocities. Dmitri Shostakovich, who had endured attacks for his “formalist” compositions in the late 1930s, became a national hero for his Symphony No. 7, the “Leningrad” Symphony, which had its premiere in Leningrad in March 1942 while the city was in the initial year of the siege.

Stalin compromised when it came to the Jews as well. Stalin’s approach to the nationality question included the false contention that Jews living in separate countries, without a land of their own, constituted separate tribes with no connection between them. But after the German invasion Stalin understood the need to repair relations with the West and so created five anti-fascist committees—for women, youth, scientists, Slavs, and for Jews—assigning each the goal of appealing to communities in the democratic West to support the

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unexpected alliance with the Soviet Union in order to defeat Hitler. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) was particularly active and effective. From the outset of its appeals it was permitted, in fact encouraged, to appeal to fellow “brother and sister Jews” in other countries, most notably in England and America, a type of rhetoric that had been forbidden since the days of the Revolution.13 The JAC documented the terrible open-air massacres that engulfed Jews in cities and towns throughout German-occupied Soviet territory. And Ehrenburg and Grossman, relying on the hard-won respect they earned by their war reporting, were able to publish articles about Jewish suffering in Krasnaya zvezda (Red Star) and Pravda, alerting front-line troops and the broader population to the specific anguish brought by the Nazis on nearly two and a half million Jews who were massacred in what has come to be called the ‘Holocaust by Bullets.’

Writing about Stalin’s leadership after the victory, when the Kremlin faced new challenges connected to the nascent Cold War, including the division of Europe, the American monopoly on atomic weapons, and tensions in the Middle East over the creation of a Jewish state, Rieber reminds us how Stalin reverted to his paranoid style. He turned on the poet Anna Akhmatova and the writer Mikhail Zoshchenko, who was particularly known for his short stories and works of satire, in 1946, as part of a broader campaign against the creative intelligentsia that had proven its loyalty during the war. And the postwar attacks on Soviet Jews were part of Stalin’s effort to withdraw a degree of autonomy that he had granted to them because of wartime demands. “The Jews suffered most severely from Stalin’s determination to correct what he regarded as the excess zeal of the nationalities during the war in assuming an autonomous role within the Soviet system” (250). As for the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, its work during the war, all its initiatives and appeals to the West, which had been carried out under the full supervision of party leaders, was now held against many of its leading figures. The secret trial of fifteen members of the JAC, including five well-known Yiddish cultural figures, led to the execution of thirteen defendants on 12 August 1952, a tragedy that has come to be commemorated as the “Night of the Murdered Poets.” Less than a decade after the Red Army liberated Majdanek and Auschwitz, the Kremlin was now engaged in its own antisemitic assault.

Such was life in Stalin’s kingdom.

Review by David R. Shearer, University of Delaware

Alfred Rieber’s book, *Stalin as Warlord*, continues the series of remarkable studies that started in 2014 with Rieber’s publication of *The Struggle for the Eurasia Borderlands: From the Rise of the Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War*. That was followed just a year later by his history of Stalin and the struggle for supremacy in Eurasia, then in 2022, his study of World War II in the Balkans, and now, just a year on, the study under review here. This massive amount of work would be enough to make the career of any scholar and yet it is only a part of Rieber’s many studies that range across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and all of European history. What connects these several volumes is that they all focus on the history of the Eurasian world up to World War I and the states and struggles that emerged after the collapse of those empires during the war. Each volume is groundbreaking in its own way, but also, in general, in the way that Rieber brings a transnational perspective to what usually are distinct fields of study. Rieber’s achievement consists in his ability to combine depth of insight with historical scope in his books. All of these works, with one exception, cover the same period, from the era of World War I to the early Cold War era. All cover roughly the same geographic areas, but each has a specific focus so that they complement rather than simply repeat each other.

In *Stalin as Warlord*, Rieber focuses on Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. The six chapters of the book cover the period of World War II and the Soviet Great Patriotic War, but not in the usual way. There is little about the actual course of the war, about individual battles, fronts, troop movements, or military production and preparedness. These are covered succinctly, but not systematically, nor in the detail found in most histories of the war. The two chapters in the first section examine the era of purges and mobilization in the late 1930s. Three chapters in the second section focus on the war years themselves. The final chapter centers on the immediate post-war years. That last chapter raises the question whether the Soviet defeat of Germany was in fact a pyrrhic victory.

Rieber focuses chapter 1 on repression and mobilization for war within the elites, what Rieber calls the core or the “center” (11) of Stalin’s socialist empire. Some aspects of this chapter are not surprising and appear in most histories of the Soviet war. For example, Rieber discusses Stalin’s distrust of military specialists and his rationale for purging the Soviet military on the eve of the war as a means to ensure a loyal officer corps. What is unusual is that this chapter includes a lengthy examination of Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, especially the evolution over the 1920s and 1930s of Tukhachevsky’s ideas about military strategy. These pages are a tour de force of exposition and succinct clarity of complex military doctrine. Stalin, as we know, distrusted

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Tukhachevsky, particularly his elite background and as a result of disagreements that stretched back to the revolutionary war era of 1918–1920. Stalin mistrusted much of the elite officer corps.

In the purges of the 1930s, Stalin spared military commanders from the revolutionary era, such as Kliment Voroshilov and Semeon Budenny. Both served as military commanders under Stalin during the revolutionary wars from 1918 to 1921, and both rose to the rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union. By the late 1930s, Voroshilov and Budenny were two among five Marshals, a group that included Tukhachevsky, but Stalin executed Tukhachevsky and swept away the top echelon of the military. Paradoxically, however, Stalin adopted Tukhachevsky’s doctrines of deep thrust and mechanized war. The paradox of Stalin’s killing of Tukhachevsky and then adopting his strategies is just the first of many that Rieber highlights in this book.

Chapter 2 shifts its focus from repression and mobilization in the center to purges and mobilization on what Rieber calls the periphery. Here, Rieber brings to bear his transnational perspective, since this is not just about purges inside the territory of the Soviet Union, but about the purges and reorientation of the Comintern, the Communist International organization during the 1930s. As in chapter 1, this chapter is also full of what Rieber describes as Stalin’s paradoxes, or outright contradictions. As Rieber shows, Stalin perceived the devastating purges of Communist movements in various countries as necessary to stamp out the parties’ autonomous popularity and eliminate any possible independence or even opposition to the Soviet Union. At the same time, that process weakened the Communist movement to the extent of collapse when war actually came to Europe. It is not surprising that the parties least affected by the Comintern purges—the French, Yugoslavian, and Italian parties—produced the strongest partisan movements that fought against the Germans.

Most histories of the Soviet Union do not include lengthy sections on the Comintern, and Rieber’s attention to the subject reflects his understanding of Stalin. The Soviet leader was a Marxist but, according to Rieber, a Marxist of a different stripe than Lenin or Trotsky. The latter two believed in the revolutionary export of socialism from Russia, whereas Stalin’s idea of revolution was, as Rieber argues, more territorial than international. According to Stalin, the primary task for Marxists was not to try to foment revolution abroad but to construct and defend socialism first and foremost in the USSR. For Stalin, then, the function of the European Communist parties was not to spread revolution, but to defend the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union. Thus, in Stalin’s view, purge of the Comintern did not fall within the realm of foreign policy. It was an extension of Stalin’s understanding of Soviet socialism. When push came to shove, Stalin sacrificed the revolutionary and autonomous potential of European Communism in favor of a movement subservient to and in defense of the Soviet homeland.


5 On Stalin’s “territorial” Marxism, see Alfred J. Rieber, “Civil Wars in the Soviet Union,” Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, 4, 1, (Winter 2003): 129-162, here 139. Hence, Stalin opposed the 1920 attempt to seize Warsaw using Bolshevik forces, a project that both Lenin and Trotsky hoped would spark revolution throughout central Europe and in Germany, especially. Stalin argued that the better strategy would be to secure more modest gains in Galicia to secure the Soviet republic’s western borders. The route of Bolshevik forces near Warsaw turned into a military catastrophe for the Bolsheviks and resulted in a shaky peace in 1921 that left Soviet territory vulnerable. Rieber, Stalin and the Struggle, 57.
In the third chapter, Rieber examines the “forging” or, more aptly, the re-forging of the state, Party, and economy to meet the onslaught of the German armies in June 1941. The outlines of this story are well known, but Rieber fills them out with his own nuances. He agrees that Stalin was well informed of the German buildup but refused to take action until it was too late for fear of creating a provocation. Rieber, like others, debunks earlier perceptions that Stalin suffered some kind of nervous breakdown as soon as the invasion started. It is clear that Stalin worked feverishly the first week of the invasion, giving orders and consulting with his immediate subordinates in the Politburo, top military commanders, and heads of economic sectors important to the defense of the country. Nonetheless, the invasion was a disaster. Rieber recounts the catastrophic collapse of the Soviet military forces and party organizations and the chaos that doomed hundreds of thousands of soldiers in the first months of the war. He describes the economic destruction that struck the country and Stalin’s initial reaction, which was to revert to his tried and true practice of putting blame on others, especially field commanders and soldiers. The chapter provides the usual litany of executions of military personnel, the infamous orders against retreat that worsened defeats at the front, and the dictator’s disastrous penchant for micromanaging military strategy. As other accounts show, however, Stalin adapted, if slowly, and by early 1943 had grown into a genuine war-leader. So too, Rieber recounts the slow but steady reemergence of the Soviet phoenix. He describes the reorganization of government and the war effort around a newly created State Defense Council, and he describes the reorganization and re-equipment of the military. After a number of early battlefield disasters, Stalin finally deferred to his military commanders and in the early months of 1943, a renewed Soviet army broke the German army’s ability to advance and then turned the tide of war.

In retelling this story, Rieber highlights again the paradoxes that characterized Stalin’s rule. The Creation of the State Defense Council proved crucial to the mobilization of key sectors in the industrial-military war effort, but this reform undercut the Communist Party as a governing institution. Moreover, supercentralization was accompanied by a simultaneous and unprecedented devolution of authority to local levels and an atrophy of the collective farm system. Paradoxically, as Rieber points out, this relaxation of central control proved beneficial to food supplies and helped create something like a revival of the Communist Party at local levels. Having decimated the Soviet Union’s military, national, cultural, and economic-industrial elites, Stalin suddenly had to reverse himself and cultivate the sympathy, support, and even self-sacrifice of the surviving members in order to keep the country functioning under conditions of an annihilating war.

Rieber focuses much of chapters 4 and 5 on Stalin’s attempts to come to terms with different key groups, his reconciliation with the country’s intelligentsia and religious leaders, and the reforms that relaxed many of the harsh policies of the 1930s. Chapter 4 focuses primarily on the technical-scientific community and Chapter 5 describes Stalin’s fickle policies toward journalists, writers, and religious leaders. This chapter is especially interesting since it contains an enlightening section on composers, which are not a usual focus in books about World War II.

Stalin’s about-face from repression to accommodation extended beyond the Soviet borders. During the 1930s, he devastated foreign Communist parties for supposed collaboration with bourgeois elements but during the war, Stalin encouraged flexibility and cooperation with all non-fascist factions. Such a reversal of course created enormous confusion and left many party organizations without effective leadership against German occupations. In the sphere of foreign policy, Stalin turned suddenly from his hostile stance toward the anti-fascist allies to seek their help in fighting the Germans. What Rieber shows us, again, is the paradox

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of Stalin struggling against his own instincts. Stalin preferred tight control. He was suspicious of any kind of autonomy, but he also understood that only by granting a measure of autonomy to society could he mobilize genuine popular support against the enemy.

Rieber agrees with Geoffrey Roberts that, for a brief period at the end of the war, Stalin flirted with the prospect of continuing international cooperation. Not only did he display a pragmatic side to other governments, Stalin also considered the possibility of different paths to socialism within countries that were occupied by Soviet troops. Communist movements might be permitted to exist in some kind of collaboration of co-existence with non-Communist political parties. For a time, then, as Rieber shows in chapter 6, Stalin tempered his compulsively suspicious character, at least externally if not internally, but his instincts soon reasserted themselves and led him to quash any hopes for a new social or international order. Stalin made it clear after the war had ended that he would return the country to the ways of the 1930s. Forgetting his own war-time compromises, he claimed that the war had been won not because of reforging the “sinews” of society, culture, and economy, but because of the strength and correctness of the very pre-war policies that Stalin had all but abandoned in the face of invasion. After 1947, Stalin’s officials began to close the country once again with anti-cosmopolitan campaigns. Repression returned, not just of selected party and military elites who had been crucial to victory, but also of Jews because of their supposed ties to the new state of Israel and their connections, formed during the war, to foreign Jewish organizations. Starting in 1947, as well, Stalin ordered purges of moderate groups from the ruling Communist parties in central European countries and, as in the 1930s, Stalinized them into subordination to his every whim. The year 1947 also marked the end of any conciliatory relations with former allies and the beginning of the Cold War era.

Rieber’s book is at its best in its descriptions of the paradoxes and numerous reversals from repression to accommodation and back to repression. One of the many paradoxes that Rieber highlights involved the dispute between the economists Eugen Varga and Nikolai Voznesensky at the end of the war. In planning for the post-war period, Varga proposed an economic model akin to something like peaceful coexistence and continued trade with capitalist countries as the best way to bring recovery to the Soviet Union. Voznesensky stressed a return to the kind of planning and autarkic reliance on internal sources that characterized the 1930s. The paradox is that, while Stalin adopted a course more in line with Voznesensky, he nonetheless had Voznesensky executed as part of the so-called Leningrad affair. Varga, though chastised for his “cosmopolitanism,” survived (237). This case bears a striking resemblance to the fate of Tukhachevsky. As discussed above, Stalin adopted the military commander’s strategies over against those of the outdated civil war commanders and yet it was Tukhachevsky who Stalin executed, just as he killed Voznesensky but adopted his economic model.

Paradoxes abound in every chapter of this book, so much so that the themes of paradox and contradiction appear to be an interpretive device, though Rieber never makes this explicit. In his discussion of Stalin’s contradictory swings in mobilizing for war, Rieber argues that Stalin’s policy reversals led to “irrational decisions,” many of which were based on impulse. These were “costly in human and material terms” and were “deeply flawed,” he writes (132-133). But, flawed in what sense, one wonders. Stalin’s back and forth policies of repression and compromise may have been costly, but if they were deeply flawed, how then do we explain Stalin’s longevity as a ruler? He was, without a doubt, one of the most ‘successful’ of the twentieth-century despots. He not only remained in power for many years, but no known threats against his life have ever surfaced (despite or because of his paranoia) and he died a natural death.

One might, in fact, argue that the very key to Stalin’s “success” lay in his ability to manage paradox. Stalin was able to impose violence when he felt threatened, but then to scale it back and even reverse himself in order to

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Page 21 of 29
stabilize his rule. This was no mean feat, and he seemed to have an instinct for it. Stalin knew how far to push repressive policies without triggering complete collapse or rebellion, and then was able to deescalate violence, knowing not only when but how to reverse his own policies so as to claim success or to blame others for excess. Even more remarkable, Stalin was able to purge, then rehabilitate, and then purge again the same segments of the population. This seems more like a kind of genius than a flaw. Paradox was certainly fundamental to Stalin’s regime, as was the cyclical application of violence, but perhaps paradox and contradiction were also fundamental to the dictator’s survival.

The other key to Stalin’s survival of course was his paranoia. Rieber also touches on this, but mostly to eschew it or at least to try to go beyond it. The explanation of paranoia is too “simple,” he writes when explaining why Stalin rounded on one or another individual or group. According to Rieber, the “common denominator” in nearly all cases of repression occurred when a person or group was engaged in activity that Stalin believed threatened his monopoly on power and ideology (262). This is certainly true, but one wonders where the difference lies. For Rieber to argue that his explanation of threat somehow differs from or goes beyond paranoia seems like the proverbial distinction without a difference. Stalin was a dictator who connected dots, at times too many dots. As we know, he was a ravenous consumer of information and, in his suspicions, he connected everything, usually in a web of intrigue and conspiracy. What else was this but paranoia? And it was both a strength and a weakness. It protected him from plots that existed and did not exist, but it also led him into massive misjudgments, such as connecting the spontaneous murder of a Soviet diplomat, Piotr Voikov, in 1927, in Warsaw, to a grand plot by Britain to provoke war. Stalin’s paranoia led him, in the late 1930s, to see disgruntled officials or marginal populations as an organized threat to the existence of the state. Paranoia led him in the late 1940s to believe that certain ethnic groups were a similar threat. In the post-war era, Jews became the primary focus of Stalin’s paranoid fantasies. Rieber is right to argue that Stalin’s radical Marxism was fundamental to his worldview and explains many of his actions, but so was paranoia. The two reinforced each other and, despite costly miscalculations, Stalin’s paranoia most likely accounts for the dictator’s long and brutal rule.9

Rieber titles his final chapter, “A Pyrrhic Victory?” and, though he poses the title as a question, the answer appears to be in the affirmative. Stalin’s return to the old system of the 1930s no doubt came as a devastating blow to millions of Soviet citizens who sacrificed so much during the war and hoped for a new beginning. For Stalin, however, victory over fascism was in no sense pyrrhic. It vindicated everything that he had done and believed. His victory, no matter the costs, confirmed his suspicious inclinations and all his brutal policies. Victory over Germany had also culminated in an empire larger than anything his mentor, Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, could have dreamed. Given Stalin’s ruthless and uncompromising temperament, and after such a decisive victory, it would have been surprising for the dictator to embrace a new world. Perhaps the final paradox of Stalin as warlord is that the society Stalin helped forge, that had ensured a stunning victory in war, was ready for something new. Stalin, however, was not ready for that new society.

Review by Alfred Rieber, Central European University, emeritus

I am grateful to Tom Maddux and H-Diplo for organizing this roundtable and selecting four distinguished historians to comment on Stalin as Warlord. My thanks to Mark Edele as well for his introduction. I am especially appreciative the efforts of Wendy Goldman, Joshua Rubenstein, and David Shearer for having given full and accurate summaries of the main interpretations of the book and the supporting evidence. Moreover, they have taken seriously its main interpretations and raised relevant questions that require further discussion.

Shearer begins his thoughtful review by showing how Stalin as Warlord fits into the larger context of my previous work. He then proceeds to give an admirable summary of the book and to take note of what I had hoped would be accepted as its original contributions in a field already populated by so many outstanding historians. Inevitably, as he points out, the book covers some ground that is well-trodden; how else could this be, given the present state of “Staliniana”? He has two objections to my approach. The first has to do with my skepticism about using the term ‘paranoia’ to describe Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s pattern of behavior. As Shearer rightly points out, he and others (including my dear friend Misha Lewin, with whom I have argued about it) have employed and defended the use of the term. In his review, Rubenstein also mentions the term. For me, paranoia as an explanatory devise to understand Stalin’s behavior as a warlord has two major weaknesses. First, paranoia originated and remains in its most strict definition a clinical term. Moreover, as the very extensive literature on the different types and manifestations of paranoia demonstrate, the term has acquired multiple meanings. But we cannot place Stalin on a couch. If the term is to be applied at all to him, then it should be only be done with care and reservations depending on specific circumstances. It seems to me that the temptation to brandish the term stems from the fact that it offers the easiest way to explain Stalin’s brutality and arbitrariness in imposing and enforcing his policies. The trouble is that the similar features show up in the reigns of Ivan IV (Groznyi), Peter the Great, Nicholas I, Vladimir Lenin and Vladimir Putin: were they all suffering from paranoia? Or was Russia a paranoid society?

The second major shortcoming in using the term paranoia is that it ignores the long-term geo-cultural problems facing Russian rulers who faced very limited restraints on their power as they attempted to consolidate, expand and reform; first to survive and then compete in the prevailing international system. What I have argued throughout my work on Russian and Soviet history is that Stalin’s suspicion of internal and external enemies, while admittedly extreme in its conception and brutal in its application, was not altogether divorced from the realities of Russian history as well as from his own experiences. His knowledge of Russian history and exposure to the violence of the Civil War and Intervention provided ample evidence


2 For example, Ronald Suny, Stalin: Passage to Revolution (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), presents a complex and massively documented portrayal of Stalin’s formative years, explaining the many sources of his personality without referring once to the term paranoia.


4 In a more nuanced use of the term, Sheila Fitzpatrick, On Stalin’s Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 2015), finds traces in the growth of Stalin’s suspicious nature from the 1930s, ramped up by the murder of Kirov (78, 113), to his declining years: “Paranoia is a term often loosely used of Stalin, but in the last five years of his life, it certainly seems to apply.” (199).
that “capitalist encirclement” was an application of Marxist-Leninist terminology to the very real international isolation of the Soviet Union. It reflected Stalin’s experience as a Bolshevik leader during the period 1917–1921, when the new state was forced to confront at one time or another the armed forces of Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, Britain, France, Japan, the United States, Italy, Poland, Romania, and the Czech Legion, all of which were engaged in efforts to partition or overthrow the Bolshevik regime with the assistance of domestic anti-Bolshevik forces. Throughout the twenties and thirties, hostility toward the Soviet Union continued in many forms, fed by resentment over non-payment of tsarist debts (as with France); prolonged non-recognition (as with US); breaks in diplomatic relations (as with Great Britain); border incidents (as with Japan); and territorial disputes (as with Romania over Bessarabia). The activities of the Comintern, and Western suspicion of Soviet motives in the Spanish Civil War and in the Chinese Nationalist resistance to Japan, further fed the very real Western fears of Soviet subversion. Soviet spies and diplomats kept Stalin informed as to the anti-Bolshevik sentiments in Britain and France. Stalin did not have to invent this very real hostility, which was further deepened by the Munich Agreements and the threat of Western intervention in the Winter War with Finland. A similar process of thought can be traced in Putin to his training and experience as a secret policeman in conspiracy theories, faced by the extension of NATO into the Baltic States and angered by the anti-Russian sentiment supporting the Maidan movement and other anti-Russian manifestations in Ukraine.

Secondly, Shearer takes issue with my use of the phrase “deeply flawed” to describe Stalin’s preparations for war; if so, he asks, “then how do we explain Stalin’s longevity as a ruler?” I do not see how my interpretation and the evidence I offer to support it necessarily prevents us from understanding Stalin’s success in surviving the Second World War. His errors in preparing for war that he knew was coming demonstrate how “deeply flawed” his policy, and how costly the victory, were. To explain how he managed to win is another question which would involve a re-examination of the military side of the conflict, which has already received much attention from both the Russian and German side. Beyond this, it was not my purpose to address much larger and complex question of his longevity as a ruler, which would have required a different book. But the


7 For more details, see my book, Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia (Cambridge University Press 2015), 100-151, and Gabriel Gorodetsky, Grand Illusion: Stalin and the Invasion of Russia (Yale University Press, 1999), especially 11-12, (on traditional Russophobia in the Foreign Office) and 267-74 (on the Hess case). For a slightly different emphasis, see Jonathan Haslam, Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 7-11.

8 To mention only a few: from the Russian side, John Erickson, The Road To Stalingrad (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), and Erickson, The Road To Berlin (Boulder, COLO: Westfield Press, 1983); and with more recent archival material, Geoffreys Roberts, Stalin’s Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); from the German side, Stephen G. Fritz, The First Soldier: Hitler as Military Leader (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
answer touches upon one of the major criticisms by Goldman. Why did the civil and military populations follow Stalin’s leadership throughout the war, from the initial defeats to victory, despite the terrible losses?

Like Shearer, but from a different viewpoint, Goldman admirably summarizes the main contributions of the book and concludes with a strong positive evaluation. Her criticisms are also twofold. First, she claims that my use of “paradox” to describe Stalin’s pattern of governance is limited as an analytical tool. Perhaps I should have made more explicit that “paradox” was a manifestation of Stalin’s responses as a leader with virtually unlimited power to what he perceived to be obstacles to building socialism from within and defending the Soviet Union from external threats. That he exaggerated these threats cannot be denied, although, as I have argued above, paranoia is not a good and sufficient term to explain his reaction.

Second, she argues that I fail to give a definitive answer to why so many people rallied around Stalin; this remark is related to Shearer’s question about Stalin’s longevity as a ruler. Goldman attributes the weakness to my inadequate attention to the social history of the war years. To be sure, I was not able to take advantage of a recent book on that subject she co-authored with Donald Filtzer which appeared too late to benefit my work. By concentrating on the elites, I may not have given sufficient credit to the working class and peasants in uniform for contributing to victory. I regard their study as a valuable addendum to, but not a correction of, my work. What I wanted to show was that defeat was a near thing and victory more costly than it should have been; that is, it was “deeply flawed” given Stalin’s mistakes in preparing for war. Let me respond by taking Goldman’s perspective as a point of departure. Goldman reminds us in her article on “primitive socialist accumulation” that forced collectivization and industrialization were attempts to accelerate the construction of the material base for the future development of socialism in a backward agrarian state under threat by encircling capitalist enemies. In my view, the combination of coercion and incentives that Stalin selected to achieve these ends produced the paradox in preparing for war, fighting it, and securing peace, and also helps explain his longevity as a ruler. To revert to an image I appropriated in the introduction to the book, Stalin emulated Peter the Great by wielding his power directed at the same time with equal ferocity to constructing a new and destroying the old society. In the process, he divided society deeply between those who benefited from the transformation, among elements of the working class and poor peasantry, and those who suffered loss of property, status, and personal freedom. A brutal collectivization, forced industrialization, purges, and the deportations of national groups on the periphery had de-stabilized the country and led to a virtual civil war in the countryside. None of the other of the other major belligerents in the war confronted the problem of leading into battle a society so deeply divided.

“Primitive socialist accumulation” nourished a latent hostility, especially in the countryside and among the non-Russian nationalities in the western borderlands that surfaced again during the initial phase of the

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German invasion. At the same time, a new generation of youth and upwardly mobile peasants and workers who had benefitted from mass education and rapid social and occupational promotion rallied behind Stalin and the Soviet leadership. These deep divisions in society manifested themselves in the extreme initial reactions of the population to the invasion, and continued throughout the war. In the first months of the war, the widespread panic, desertion, and mass surrenders were offset by fierce resistance by Red Army units and volunteers that cost the Wehrmacht losses of men and equipment they could not afford. Partisans spontaneously appeared in the forests behind the German lines. At the same time, anti-Soviet activity broke out in the Baltic republics and West Ukraine, later expanding in the Crimea, and North Caucasus. The Nazi leader Adolf Hitler failed to take advantage of the disaffection by offering major concessions to the nationalities by granting autonomy or to the peasants by dissolving the collective farms. It was one of the major reasons for his defeat. By contrast, Stalin rapidly advanced talented cadres, responded creatively to incentives from below, and came round to organizing the partisans into a major force disrupting the German supply lines behind the fighting front.

Goldman also challenges the use of the term “warlord” to define Stalin’s role in the years covered by the book. Contrary to her assertion, this is more than “a catchy title.” Although the term originated as a description of rising regional leaders in China, it has been expanded to characterize the extreme concentration of military and civil authority in the hand of the leader of a major power during wartime. If anyone deserves the term, it was Stalin. No other dictator—not Hitler, Italian Fascist leader Benito Mussolini, or Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Togo—concentrated and exercised power to such an extent in fighting the war. To be sure, as I have pointed out, Stalin assigned specific functions to the members of the inner circle, yielded command decisions to the military leaders while reserving the right to approve them, and created new organizations (although I did not mention all of them in the book) to carry out and even take the initiative in mobilizing the population. But once victory was assured, Stalin was just as quick to withdraw the responsibilities from his subordinates and dissolve the wartime organizations. I am not the only historian of the Soviet Union to have found the appellation warlord suited to Stalin. It has, moreover, also been used by historians of Britain to describe Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who, during the war, amassed power unprecedented for a British statesman since Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger in the late eighteenth century.13

In his review, Haslam asserts that I “skirt around the sensitive issue of ideology.” Well, it depends upon what he means by “skirt.” In this book, I analyze how Stalin revised Marxist-Leninist theorizing about revolution and the transition to socialism in order to prepare for war and then to proclaim an even more radical transformation of the meaning of the war as one of “freedom people against fascism” (pp.168-69 and 201). In fighting the war and winning the peace, as I demonstrate, Stalin kept adjusting his definition of what and who was Marxist. In this, he followed the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin. Haslam argues that ideology is the basis for foreign policy. I see things a bit differently. From the beginning of my work, I have attached to ideology an important but not overriding role in the formation of foreign policy. Haslam correctly identifies my early career with the height of the Cold War. Ideology was then all the rage in official and academic circles. In my first book, Stalin and the French Communist Party, 1941–1947, which Haslam did not cite, I strongly emphasized how Stalin adjusted the Marxist-Leninist concept of revolution to fit conditions in Western and Eastern Europe. Later, I expanded and refined my interpretation of popular democracy as an intermediate state in the transition to socialism along two paths, the parliamentary (growing out of the

Popular Front and first attempted in Spain) and the insurrectionary (exemplified during World War II in Yugoslavia). If I skirted ideology in *Stalin as Warlord*, then at least I did not repeat myself.

Haslam also claims that I hardly mention the Spanish Civil War in this text. This is true; but my *Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia* contains on pages 161–69 a section called “Spain: an Embryonic Popular Democracy?” in a chapter on the Comintern and foreign policy in the 1930s. Haslam further asserts that I did not consult the Comintern archives, or “the thousands of documents on foreign policy leading up to June 1941” which he consulted in his recent book, already cited above. The documents he cites from the Yeltsin archives mainly concern the internal history of the Comintern. They contain some interesting details on Stalin’s relations with the Bulgarian Communist and head of the Comintern Georgi Dimitrov, without clarifying any further Stalin’s complex views on the uses of the Comintern to deal mainly with the impact of the Comintern activities on the foreign policies of Britain and France. Haslam’s statement that Stalin “closed off the Soviet Union from any ideological penetration from outside” is correct as a general observation. But again, much depends on the definition of ideological. Up to the years of the Terror, 1937-1938, censorship of foreign *belles lettres* was inconsistent, allowing the substratum of the Soviet intelligentsia widespread access to original works and translations appearing in *Inostrannaia literatura*. Even after the purge of Glavlit in 1937, the journal continued to exist, albeit heavily censored until 1943. According to Loren Graham: “Of course, there were always cracks in the censorship wall. And in the sciences, these cracks were officially sanctioned. Western scientific journals continued to be taken throughout the period, although editorials and other “political” materials were deleted in the translated versions distributed by the state.” The paradox shows up again. Ideology did not blind Stalin to the practical uses that Western ideas might serve on a very selective, pragmatic basis: to push the intelligentsia into believing they belonged to a European civilization, however astray it had wandered, and to provide the scientific community with the latest technical information so that it would not fall behind, just so long in both cases that “pernicious and subversive” political ideas were not allowed to creep in.

Rubenstein reminds us of the large literature on Stalin without listing all of the biographies, to say nothing of specialized topics. He states that my description of Stalin’s early years “only begins” to explain his murderous policies. But I do not stop there. I make the connection between Stalin’s personality, the conspiratorial atmosphere of the Bolshevik underground, and his determination once in power to carry out a rapid transformation of an overwhelmingly agrarian Russia with a small proletariat, which required ruthless and brutal methods supported by substantial elements in the party. Rubenstein also argues that my treatment of the effect of Stalin’s decision in preparing for war on the course of the war is “inconsistent.” This is indeed exactly what they were. That is the whole point of my use of the term “paradox.” Also missed are the reasons for Stalin’s suspicions of Britain which, as I have pointed out in the book, were rooted in history, ideology, and his experience. Again, Stalin was not alone: Politiburo member Andrei Zhdanov, Foreign Minister Viacheslav Molotov, and Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Vyshinsky shared his views in their opposition to Litvinov.

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16 Personal communication, 1 July 2023.
Rubenstein is also not convinced by my explanation of the causes lying behind the series of disasters in the summer of 1941. What I tried to stress, in contrast to other accounts, was indeed the inconsistency of Stalin’s preparations for war: he built the infrastructure of defense and the army, while purging essential elements for meeting the anticipated attack. Again, Stalin was not alone among the among wartime leaders to be misled by the “noise” of contradictory intelligence. The Poles in 1939 and French in 1940 were similarly confused and paid a high price for their miscalculations. It was the same with Stalin’s error in expecting that the main thrust of a German invasion would come in Ukraine; he was not alone. Soviet Generals Semeon Timoshenko, Georgy Zhukov and Nikolai Vatutin shared his opinion. My aim again was to avoid attributing all Stalin’s mistakes to his alleged paranoia.

Rubenstein gives credit to my treatment of Stalin’s temporary and tentative compromises with the Jewish community in the Soviet Union. What he did not mention, and I regret that I omitted it from my account, is the military contribution of the Jewish soldiers to the Soviet victory: it was unequaled in any of the other Allied armies. There was a very high percentage of officers of Jewish origin, due to the regulations that required higher education as a prerequisite for a commission. Two hundred and fourteen Jewish officers held the rank of general or admiral. One hundred and forty-seven Jewish soldiers were awarded the highest decoration in the Army, Hero of the Soviet Union. For a better sense of the magnitude of the Jewish contribution, this put them in fifth place among the declared Soviet “nationalities,” after Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Tatars, although they ranked eleventh in total population. Insofar as the data allows, it has been estimated that 500,000 Jews served in the army, of whom almost a third, 140,000-180,000, perished, a greater percentage of losses among combatants than any of the other national groups. Stalin is often portrayed as anti-Semite. Once again, the picture is more complex. The Jewish population suffered greatly under Stalin. Yet, the Soviet Union was the only country in Europe where a large Jewish population was sheltered from the Holocaust. During the war, he employed individuals of Jewish origin in many fields: notably, Foreign Commissar Maksim Litvinov; Politbureau member Lazar Kaganovich, Director of the Political Administration of Red Army; Lev Mekhlis, deputy head of the NKVD; Lev Shvartzman (shot in 1951); physicist Lev Landau; economist Evgeny Varga; journalist Ilya Ehrenburg; poet Boris Pasternak; and pianist and Stalin prize winner Emil Gilels. Most even survived after the war, when again Stalin turned viciously against the Anti-Fascist Committee, and then in his last year when, aging, sick and exhausted, he went completely off the rails. But the full story of the Doctors Plot, and alleged plans for deportation of Soviet Jews, remains mired in rumor and controversy.

The heroic and tragic were so inextricably tangled in the Soviet experience in World War II, that any attempt to find a satisfactory balance between the two is bound to fall short of satisfying all critics. Similarly, the search will undoubtedly continue to evaluate Stalin’s colossal errors and great achievement in leading the country to victory. In contemporary Russia, Putin has attempted to identify the “Great Fatherland War,” as I prefer to translate it, as the defining event, what Mircea Eliade called “The Great Time, the sacred time,” replacing the October Revolution. The message has been taken up recently in an outpouring of studies in Russia celebrating local and regional contributions to the war. Since this book was published, the distance

17 Zvi Gitelman, “Why They Fought: What Soviet Jewish Soldiers Saw and How It is Remembered,” NCSEER Working Paper, University of Washington, 2011) where a comparison is made with the US Army, where many fewer Jewish high ranking officers were appointed, and only one Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded; see also more recently, with additional data, Oleg Budnitskii et al., History of the Jews in the Soviet Union, 5 vols. (New York: NYU Press, 2022) vol. 3, War, Conquest and Catastrophe, especially appendix, 267-272.


between the official and popular appreciation of the war has widened between Russia and the former republics, especially the Baltic republics and Ukraine, achieving a level of distortion that will take a long time to correct. All sides might reflect on the wisdom of the sage Lao Tsu, who wrote in the sixth century BC, “Oversharpen the blade, and the edge will soon blunt.”

20 Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching* (New York, Viking, 1972) chap. 9 line 2 (no pagination).