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Introduction by Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

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Introduction by Silvio Pons, Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa

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When the first volume of Stephen Kotkin's biography of Stalin appeared in 2014, it was clear that the author had undertaken a gigantic intellectual effort to put Joseph Stalin's personality in the wider context of the Russian and world history of his time and that he would maintain this ambitious perspective in the volumes that followed. The second volume wholly lives up to such a promise, even in the face of the even more serious challenge posed by covering the years between 1929 and 1941. As Kotkin remarks, whereas in the first volume Stalin was often "offstage for long stretches as global developments unfolded around him," here he is present "on nearly every page" (xii). By no means was Stalin perceived as a crucial personality in global affairs even in the late 1920s, but he achieved world-wide celebrity in the 1930s through the 'revolution from above,' program. His fame reached its peak with the fatal choice of the Pact with Nazi Germany in 1939. While Leon Trotsky was his antagonist in the struggle to become Vladimir Lenin's heir, the crossing of paths with Adolf Hitler now occupied center stage for Stalin in the increasingly dangerous context of world politics.

The contributors to this roundtable unanimously praise the wide scope of Kotkin's second volume, the vast range of his knowledge of all manner of sources, and his balanced approach to major historical problems. Gabriel Gorodetsky maintains that the book "blurs the line between the 'hero' and the society, intertwining the 'bottom up' and 'top down' approaches, which have divided the historiography of the Soviet Union for so long." Jonathan Haslam compares celebrated biographies, such as those by Robert Conquest and Robert Tucker with Kotkin's work, in order to underline the crucial difference made by "his tireless search for explanation and the deep-seated reluctance that holds him back from rushing to conclusive moral judgements." Cynthia Roberts appreciates how Kotkin successfully integrates "what Stalin knew and tried to achieve given the constraints and opportunities that presented themselves," and avoids entanglement in historical debates and models from the social sciences. Essentially, the roundtable debates Kotkin's analysis of Stalin's international policies and worldviews. However, what needs emphasizing is that the author provides an invaluable and comprehensive perspective of the interactions and connections between domestic developments in the 1930s—basically, the collectivization of the peasantry and the Great Terror—and the geopolitical settings, choices, and outcomes that eventually resulted in the outbreak of the war.

Where they are critical, the reviewers mainly focus on the balance that Kotkin establishes between ideology and realism in Stalin's thinking and conduct. Their criticisms differ substantially. Gorodetsky notes that Kotkin has examined several moments of Stalin's foreign policy without using "the traditional prism of the dichotomy between ideology and realpolitik," even if he reproaches the author for having basically understood Stalin as a personality driven by ideological motivations, and who consequently pursued an expansionist foreign policy. Here Gorodetsky quotes his own work in order to back up an historical account that gravitates around the combined notions of realism, space, and geopolitics. In his view, Kotkin should have better highlighted "the geopolitical continuum in Stalin's conduct of foreign policy" which emerged particularly in the aftermath of the Pact and even more so in the scramble for the Balkans. For Gorodetsky, even Stalin's appeasement of Hitler and his dismissal of intelligence information about 'Operation Barbarossa' must be seen through the lens of his despotic rule, and indeed within the framework of Russia's historic geopolitical imperatives over the long term.

Haslam puts forward quite a different kind of criticism. He argues that Stalin was a Marxist-Leninist "in his ultimate objectives," but that this did not prevent him from acting as a realist according to circumstances. Yet his strategy cannot be identified with "the traditional reason of state that even the Tsars would have

recognized as legitimate.” In this respect, Haslam shares Kotkin’s views. Nevertheless, he sees difficulties in the treatment of several problems, since the idea of exploiting inter-imperialist contradictions—a notion that Stalin had inherited from Lenin—cannot be taken as a general explanatory tool. In particular, he thinks that Kotkin has understated the fact that some crucial passages were less the consequence of Stalin’s will than a reaction to moves and constraints imposed by other actors. For instance, the policy shift outlined when Moscow joined the League of Nations in 1934, inspired by Foreign Minister Maksim Litvinov, was “the direct result of choices Hitler made, not Stalin.” Haslam also reproaches Kotkin for not paying sufficient attention to the Cambridge group of spies, who help reinforce “Stalin’s view that hostility to Russia was fundamentally ideological” and that, as a consequence, Litvinov’s strategy “was predicated on an illusion.”

Cynthia Roberts focuses her contribution on strategic and military issues. She shares Kotkin’s narrative of Soviet isolation and Stalin’s difficulty in imagining and implementing international alliances because of his undifferentiated vision of imperialism. She also appreciates the author’s account of the bloody purges of the Red Army, which dismisses the existence of any conspiracies, and shows how Stalin discounted the serious damage that this repression would cause to its strategic thinking and operative efficiency. Her criticism focuses on specific, if significant, aspects of Kotkin’s work such as the consequences of Stalin’s “limited wars” before 1941. In particular, Roberts remarks how the conventional wisdom about modern warfare deployed by General Zhukov against the Japanese army in 1939 should be seen as out of place. In other words, despite the military success that was achieved, the Red Army nonetheless displayed limits which resulted from the repression of the two previous years. The picture of weaknesses and predicament of the pre-war Red Army, culminating in the debacle of the Finnish war, thus becomes more coherent. However, the main point remains Stalin’s incapacity to understand Hitler’s aims. “Kotkin’s Stalin was increasingly fearful and reactive,” Roberts remarks, and he failed in the vital task of identifying the threat posed.

A comment by Haslam, one which also has more general implications for Stalin’s biography (and for Kotkin’s third volume), is worth noting. He observes that Stalin did not dismiss the idea of world revolution, as E. H. Carr maintained, but he believed “in spreading the revolution only through force of Russian arms.” This point, again, has much to do with the question of ideology and the legacy of the revolution of 1917. If we assume that the old opposition between realism and ideology hardly makes sense given our understanding of Stalin today, then we need to look into the multiple variations these same notions can take. This also demands debating how far Stalin was a realist and how far he was ideological, according to the changing circumstances and challenges he faced. In this respect, Kotkin’s treatment of the Second World War will surely make a decisive contribution to unravelling the complexities of this history.

### **Participants:**

**Silvio Pons** is Professor of Contemporary History at the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa. He is the President of the Gramsci Foundation in Rome. He has extensively written on the Cold War, the Soviet Union, European Communism, and the global history of Communism. His main publications include *Stalin and the Inevitable War* (Frank Cass, 2002); *Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War* (Frank Cass, 2005); *A Dictionary of Twentieth Century Communism* (Princeton University Press, 2010); *The Global Revolution. A History of International Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2014). He is the General Editor of the *Cambridge History of Communism* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

**Gabriel Gorodetsky** is a quondam fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, and emeritus professor of history at Tel Aviv University. He was the founder and director of the Cummings Center for Russian Studies at Tel

Aviv University, 1995-2005. Professor Gorodetsky has published widely on Soviet foreign policy in the interwar period and the Second World War. Among his leading publications are *The Precarious Truce: Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1924-1927* (Cambridge University Press, 1977, reissued 2009), *Stafford Cripps' Mission to Moscow, 1940-1942* (Cambridge University Press, 1984, reissued 2002), *Mif Ledolkola* published in Moscow in 1995, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (Yale University Press, 1999), published also in French, German, Russian and Hebrew, and most recently *The Complete Maisky Diaries* (Yale University Press, 2017), in three volumes. A compendium volume, *The Maisky Diaries: Red Ambassador to the Court of St. James's* was published by Yale University Press in 2015 and translated into seven languages.

**Jonathan Haslam** is the George F. Kennan Professor in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. His most recent book is *Near and Distant Neighbors. A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015). His next book, with Princeton University Press, is an archive-based history of Comintern and its role in distorting the contours of international relations in the run-up to World War II, due to appear in 2019.

**Cynthia Roberts** is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Hunter College, City University of New York; a Research Scholar at the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, Columbia University; and an Adjunct Associate Professor of International Affairs at Columbia. She is the author of *The BRICS and Collective Financial Statecraft* (Oxford University Press, 2017) with L.E. Armijo and S.N. Katada, *Russia and the European Union: The Sources and Limits of "Special Relationships"* (U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), in addition to articles in scholarly journals and book chapters. Her current research interests include the sources of Russian foreign, military, nuclear and economic policies; the military and financial statecraft of contemporary great powers; and problems associated with deliberate and inadvertent escalation in coercive diplomacy and war.

The second volume of Stephen Kotkin's biography of Iosif Stalin, is an ambitious innovative approach to biography writing. It is a colossal, complex, and colourful mosaic of hundreds observations and snippets of Soviet *vie quotidienne*, society, culture, literature, economy, military, and diplomacy (to mention just a few spheres assembled) from which a larger coherent picture emerges. It is also a contextual biography, which blurs the line between the 'hero' and the society, intertwining 'the bottom up' and 'top down' approaches, which have divided the historiography of the Soviet Union for so long. Kotkin's all-encompassing erudition certainly enhances his well-deserved reputation as one of the leading historians of Soviet Russia in the interwar period.

Adopting a chronological approach, at times even day-by-day accounts, allows Kotkin to piece together the intrinsic contextual environment in which Stalin functioned while showing the vast variety of topics the Soviet leader had to cope with simultaneously. Stalin emerges from such an approach as a more rounded figure. The exposure of the pivotal role of the human factor, transcending controversies over policy and ideology, is indeed most welcome. It is instructive to glean from the biography the vast room for manoeuvre left for his entourage in the Kremlin as well as for the military, diplomats, and intellectuals even under the *Vozhd's* most ruthless authoritarian regime. This is a rare facet of Soviet politics in Western historiography, where personalities remained anonymous if not caricatured.

The linear chronological path of the biography, juxtaposing the often contradicting and complex facets of life under Stalin, is surely the most effective way of gaining an unbiased and rounded view of Stalin's despotism. The reader will encounter admirable biographical sketches of Stalin, all encompassing, and often concise, with penetrating psychological, cultural and social observations. (See for example, 303 and 309). Kotkin reins in the huge, colourful, complex and intellectual palette of various figures which such a biography demands. His approach obviously also calls for a literary talent, which is there in abundance. The vignette biographies of secondary figures are small gems in the large mosaics. They are arranged in scores and scores of short sub-chapters. Such for example is "The General Secretary's Wife—A Rightist," describing the last week of July and early September of 1929, when Stalin was on his annual holiday in Sochi. It depicts Stalin's grip over the party machine from afar, while he coped with Leon Trotsky's challenges, involvement in the editing and control of political literature and the Press, and concurrently engagement in the restorations of relations with Britain, which had been severed in 1927, the courting of author Maxim Gorky, as well as his profound interest in literature, and finally the loving and yet tormented relations with his wife Nadya, who later committed suicide. All of that, and more, within a space of three pages (22-24).

Kotkin further shies away from the ever present temptation to enhance myths which are abundant in both Russian and Western historiography. Thus, the 1934 murder of Sergey Kirov, the head of the Bolshevik Party in Leningrad, is admirably treated in a perfectly balanced way for a topic so extensively chewed on and laden with conspiracy theories. (Chapter 4). He weighs the historical evidence with an unbiased expert approach, dismissing any suggestion that Stalin was behind the murder. At the same time he does show convincingly how Stalin made the assassination "into an epoch-defining event" that was most likely the precursor to the great terror (235).

While certainly bringing to the fore the reign of terror, with all its gruesome details, a justifiable decision considering the span of years under discussion, Kotkin is most careful in avoiding the trap of simplistic one-dimensional descriptions of Stalin, as well as applying an absolute moral yardstick. Many biographies of Stalin

have done so, thus rendering the narrative either anecdotal, diabolical, or hagiographical. However, it is this detached mundane analysis of the anatomy of a dictatorship which underlines its horror. It may serve as a relevant universal warning about the rise of authoritarian leaderships far beyond the present biography. It is incredible how fast the least likely and most easily dismissed person among the Bolsheviks accrued total power (67). It is heartbreaking, for instance to follow the fate of Nikolai Bukarin, the prominent Bolshevik politician; while in 1929-1930 he could still air sharp criticism of Stalin, within less than four years he had to stoop low, pleading for his life.

Kotkin's treatment of the terror, and the way it encompassed every sphere of Soviet life and served to enhance what he frequently refers to as Stalin's despotism, is to be highly commended. He decidedly dismisses decades of cold war historiography, which simply attributed it to the elusive, barely satisfactory psychiatric diagnosis of 'paranoia.' He opts instead for a structural explanation, which relates the purges to the systemic, almost scientific, creation of the authoritarian edifice rooted in the legacy of like-minded regimes throughout history. He convincingly attributes to Stalin the "radical reinvention of the Soviet elite ... executing or incarcerating those he deemed to be of a bygone epoch while promoting and nurturing hundreds of thousands of new people" (493-494). Kotkin's interlacing of the 'normalcy' of everyday life with the turmoil caused by the terror, collectivization, or the Nazi Soviet pact, is the closest 'Soviet' equivalent to the reflections of Hannah Arendt on the "banality of evil" in response to the trial of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann, one of the main architects of the Final Solution (See for instance "A Despot's Realm," 402-405).<sup>1</sup>

A word on sources: what rich and impressive research, reflected in 169 dense pages of footnotes spread over three columns on each page. Alas, it is such a pity that the publishers have chosen such a miniscule font that it is barely readable. Of more concern, though, is Kotkin's uncommon practice of quoting in full the archival references of his sources, even when he quotes them from secondary sources.

The virtue of Kotkin's analysis of Stalin's foreign policy is the resort to a wider global perspective rather than the common narrow Western one. This is particularly discernible in the attention given to Soviet policies in the Far East (see, for instance, 83-87). As refreshing is the exposition of the various layers of Soviet foreign policy, which are not examined through the traditional prism of the dichotomy between ideology and realpolitik. While avoiding this trap, Kotkin's version reflects his unshaken a priori belief that Soviet foreign policy was expansionist and guided by ideology. That is puzzling as the actual narrative often lays bare the centrality of personalities and the supremacy of 'nationalism' rather than the subdued ideological rhetoric ("a man possessed by *raison d'état*, Stalin's actions were often highly personal," 465). But at the end we are left with the core of Kotkin's presentation of Stalin as an "ideologically blinkered despot," while expansionism appears to be embedded in the genes of the Russian state in its various guises (764).

The title Kotkin chose for the second volume, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929*, is hardly justified considering that the terror seems to be the leitmotif holding the narrative together. In fact it becomes rather obvious, as Kotkin himself admits, that "Stalin was bafflingly slow to come to grips with the centrality of ideology in the Nazi program" (557). Out of nearly 900 pages, only 100 really focus on the clash of the titans, covering the dramatic events from the issue of directive 'Barbarossa' in December 1940 to Adolf Hitler's invasion of Russia in June 1941. With few exceptions, the narrative follows the accepted wisdom, which, paradoxically, was at least partially formulated by Stalin himself as a justification of his failure to foresee the Nazi invasion. Kotkin

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

curtly dismisses my own evaluation of Stalin's foreign policy on the eve of the war as a figment of imagination, oddly after hailing my work as towering above all others in English in the same paragraph (fn. 92, p. 107). All the more so since my assessment was not a whimsical statement of belief, but rather a conclusion drawn from an extensive archival research for *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia*<sup>2</sup> (from which the present book clearly profits). Stalin's historicism, as Kotkin himself eloquently demonstrates, hardly rested on solid Marxist grounds. Stalin, who was personally involved in the rewriting of the history of the Bolsheviks, rejected the revolutionary terminology in an earlier draft, suggesting, "what we need are textbooks with facts, events, names. History should be history" (179). "While maintaining the Marxist core of class struggle," Kotkin admits, Stalin's book "offered a nationalist narrative of Russia's 'gathering of the lands'—from Kievan Rus, in the tenth century, through the Stalin Constitution of 1936—in the spirit of nineteenth-century historiography" (465), which, needless to say, was highly nationalistic. There is no proof to suggest that behind the closed doors in the Kermlin, Stalin himself would resort to such schematic and ideological vocabulary. The only exception being when he was speaking to Comintern functionaries.

Rather than ideology, Russia's spatial immensity, further accentuated by the intricate fabric of a markedly multi-ethnic society, determined the principles governing its foreign policy. Thus the legacy of the past is anchored in fixed geopolitical and geo-cultural premises, though somewhat obscured by the traditional practice of dressing intrinsic national interests in an ideological cloak. This is not to suggest that the Soviet Union ceased to embrace communism, just as much as the British never ceased to endorse their imperial past and capitalism. And yet, notions of space and geopolitics, applied to conflicts concerning overlapping interests or regional ethnic issues, and manipulated through the instruments of balance-of-power politics, were and remain the *modus operandi* for the execution of Russian foreign policy.

The signature of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact reflected Stalin's determination not to become the 'mercenary' of Britain and France in the war against Germany. Gone were the days, when the assumption of the Leninist non-intervention 'defeatism' in an 'imperialist war,' was expected to create the conducive conditions for the spread of communism into the heart of Europe. Shortly after the outbreak of war, Stalin personally instructed Georgi Dimitrov, the President of the Comintern, not to cherish such dreams. "In the First Imperialist War," he warned, "the Bolsheviks overestimated the situation. We all rushed ahead and made mistakes! This can be explained, *but not excused*, by the conditions prevailing then. *Today* we must not repeat the mistakes made by the Bolsheviks then."<sup>3</sup>

Having succeeded in staying out of the war, Stalin had not set his mind on an inevitable colossal clash with Hitler, as the present volume implies, but rather on the agenda for a peace conference which he expected to be convened by 1942. Stalin hoped that such a conference, attended by a debilitated British Empire, would topple the Versailles agreement, and acknowledge the new Soviet security arrangements in Eastern and Northern Europe. Perhaps even more striking is the fact that, espousing the traditional geopolitical Russian view, Stalin saw in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact an opportunity to redress the grievances, which he felt had

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<sup>2</sup> G. Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion, Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 8. The italics are mine.

been inflicted on Russia, not only at the Versailles Peace Conference and in the inter-war period, but also in the course of the nineteenth century, specifically in the Paris and Berlin agreements following the Crimean War of 1856 and the San Stefano treaty following the Russo-Turkish wars in 1877-1878. The forgotten story of the scramble for the Balkans in 1939-1941, which in fact represented the reopening of the nineteenth-century 'Eastern Question,' best illustrates the 'geopolitical continuum' in Stalin's conduct of foreign policy. The annexation of Bessarabia in June 1940 is attributed by Kotkin and most historians to "greed," yet another example of blatant Bolshevik expansionism (See chap. 13 and particularly 770-775). But the move was motivated, in fact, by the need to improve the strategic and geopolitical position of the Soviet Union by securing the littoral of the Black Sea, and thus control of the mouth of the Danube and the northern access to the Bosphorus straits.

The common vivid presentation of Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov's negotiations with Hitler in Berlin in November 1940 as a proof that Stalin had conspired with Hitler to divide the world is now contested by the new available documentary evidence. The directive for the talks, for instance, dictated to Molotov in Stalin's dacha in his long hand, was patently confined to the intrinsic Soviet interests in the Balkans and the Turkish Straits, determined by considerations of security. Stalin explained to no other than Dimitrov that the approach was induced by the threats posed to Russia in the Black Sea. "Historically the danger has always come from there," Stalin said, revealing his frame of mind, "the Crimean War - the capture of Sebastopol - the intervention of Wrangle in 1919 etc."<sup>4</sup> The triangular urge to the Sea (Pacific, Baltic Sea and the Black Sea) had been and remains a cardinal principle in Russian geopolitically oriented foreign policy.

Kotkin's judgment that Stalin's policies in the period preceding the German invasion were essentially aggressive and based on the wish to take advantage of the war to seize as much territory as possible is erroneous. Stalin's assignments to the various communist parties at the outbreak of the war, conform with what I believe to have been the premises of Soviet foreign policy. Stalin warned the Communist parties that Russia was "content being confined to its own *small* lebensraum."<sup>5</sup> In a tête-à-tête conversation with British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, Ivan Maisky, the veteran and experienced Soviet ambassador to London complained that "British statesmen and politicians had been always divided into two groups. One embodied primarily the state interests of Great Britain and the second embodied primarily the class feelings and prejudices of the ruling top circles." To which Eden grinned and replied:

"There is much truth in what you say. But then in the Soviet Union you too have different people. People who, being guided by state interests, are prepared to make a compromise with the *wicked capitalists*, and people who object to it."

"Let's assume that this is the case," I re-joined, "but the difference is that the S[oviet] G[overnment] has *never* pursued and does not pursue *Gefühlspolitik*. The S[oviet]

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<sup>4</sup> Bulgarian National Library, Dimitrov Diary, 25 November 1940.

<sup>5</sup> P. Anderson and A.O. Chubaryan, eds., *Komintern I vtoraya mirovaya voina* (Moscow: Pamyatniki Istoricheskoi Myicli, 1994), I, 122-124.



G[overnment] is utterly realistic in its foreign policy. When state interests and ideas collide, state interests always emerge with the upper hand.”<sup>6</sup>

Kotkin describes most adequately the work of various intelligence branches on the eve of ‘Operation Barbarossa’; the extent to which Soviet intelligence preceded its Western counterparts in providing Stalin with precise and reliable information on German intentions particularly from December 1940, merely two weeks after Hitler signed his directive for war with Russia. However, the way Stalin processed the intelligence conforms very much to the way historians perceive his policies to have been. In *Grand Delusion* I provided ample archival evidence, much of which is unfortunately now again closed to researchers and is available only in a distilled version. That evidence shows how Stalin’s delusion about Hitler’s psyche and his intentions, seeing him in his own mirror image, led him to pursue appeasement up to the eve of war. His ‘appeasement’ deflected the collators and analysts of intelligence from being independent in their evaluations. Throughout the months preceding the war, Stalin made breath-taking efforts to reconcile Hitler. Such, for instance, were his responses to the attempts made by Friedrich von Schulenburg, the German ambassador in Moscow, to bring about a meeting between Stalin and Hitler. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s desperate attempts to embroil Russia at war and deflect Hitler from the West, when Britain’s situation became desperate following the fall of Greece, the setbacks in the North African campaign, and the defeats at sea, reinforced Stalin’s misguided concepts. Moreover, the probability of negotiations could not be discarded. Contrary to the common belief, neither British intelligence, nor Churchill, fully grasped the likelihood of a German-Soviet war until the end of May 1941. Like Stalin, British intelligence regarded the deployment of the Wehrmacht on the Soviet border as means of exerting pressure on the Russians and a prelude to negotiations with Stalin. The deflections seemed to be validated by the bizarre episode of German official Rudolf Hess’s solo peace mission flight to London in mid-May and the bungling of the episode by British intelligence which used the mission ‘mendaciously’ to prevent the Russians from signing the imagined agreement with the Germans and keeping them guessing whether negotiations were indeed underway.

Any interpretation which attributes Stalin’s conduct of foreign affairs to the whims of tyranny, or to an ideological drive towards relentless expansionism, seems to me to overlook Russia’s tenacious adherence to imperatives that were deeply rooted within its history. It leaves one wondering whether in the sphere of foreign policy universal ideologies, except for Hitler’s Nazism, have not been merely instrumental in manipulating and moulding public opinion, or sustaining legitimacy in the age of democracy and the masses. In order to understand the twentieth century, as well as today’s Russia, it might be after all necessary to resort to the icons of Halford McKinder, Niccolò Machiavelli, Cardinal Richelieu, Klemens von Metternich, and Otto von Bismarck rather than Karl Marx, Woodrow Wilson, Vladimir Lenin, or Milton Friedman.

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<sup>6</sup> Gorodetsky, ed., *The Complete Maisky Diaries* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2017), III, 13 October 1941.

Review by Jonathan Haslam, Institute for Advanced Study

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It was not so long ago that Stephen Kotkin produced to universal acclaim the first part of his multi-volume biography of Iosif Stalin.

Whereas the first thousand pages of the story focused on the circumstances of Stalin's rise to power, the second thousand, in this book, brings us closer to the man himself. Taken together, the two volumes represent an astonishing achievement. Of course, the biography stands on the shoulders of many others. He has plundered far and wide from every conceivable secondary source as well as from the available archives. But those who have never had to penetrate the maze of incomplete (censored) Russian sources have no idea just how difficult this massive enterprise is.

And in stark contrast to the celebrated biographers who walked this stony path in penance barefoot before him, notably the late Robert Conquest and the late Robert Tucker, Kotkin has no youthful past as a former Communist, nor the desperate need to exorcise the demon who made his early married life a wretched misery to carry him through the hard labour.<sup>1</sup>

For both, a reasoned discussion of Stalin could last only so far. Not a religious man, Conquest had no doubt that Stalin was evil, and he found it almost impossible to accept that colleagues, young and old, particularly E.H. Carr, Sheila Fitzpatrick and J. Arch Getty, could not or would not see this as plain truth.<sup>2</sup>

The question is how far that fact, if fact it is, can tell us why exactly Stalin did what he did and whether, if one is evil, every action one takes is also by necessity evil. As in Samson's paradox (*Judges*, 14:18)—out of the eater came forth meat; out of the strong came forth sweetness.

The burden of the personal past took its toll on the two Roberts. Tucker, in particular, was a man haunted by Stalin. Every talk he gave began with the tragic story of his extended duty at the U.S. embassy in Moscow when Stalin effectively held hostage the woman he loved and married.<sup>3</sup>

This deep abyss between the two Roberts and Kotkin makes all the difference to the thrust of Kotkin's biography, prompting his tireless search for explanation and the deep-seated reluctance that holds him back from rushing to conclusive moral judgements about Stalin and explaining what happened through that lens.

In this respect, although unacknowledged, Kotkin stands four square with Carr, who came from a tradition that regarded moral judgements in history as pointless and antithetical to good work, though Kotkin, in direct

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purges of the Thirties* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1968); Robert Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879-1929* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> This was the subject of many conversations with the author from 1986.

<sup>3</sup> I had extensive exposure to Tucker from the autumn of 1984 through to 1988. His wife, Zhenya, used to complain that, having escaped Stalin, she had to spend the rest of her life living with him around the home.

contrast to Carr, sees Stalin as very much the committed Marxist-Leninist. And this leads us to the critical issue in this volume of Stalin and foreign policy. It is, after all, subtitled “Waiting for Hitler.”

One can plausibly argue that the most horrific of Stalin’s deeds at home—notably but not exclusively the terror—directly reflected a uniquely evil personality that justifies forceful moral condemnation of the kind Conquest offers, whereas in foreign policy his behavior was not morally different from that of other powers, past and present. Would Vladimir Lenin here have acted substantially differently?

The democracies were as brutal as any state in shedding blood to win World War I. With their dubious colonial conquests still under their belts in the interwar period, British and French governments were not exactly on a higher moral plane from others less well placed.

Yet the justifiable urge to condemn Stalin for the evils he committed within Russia—the terror, the forced collectivisation of agriculture and the famine in Ukraine—has all too frequently marred an objective assessment of how the Soviet Union behaved abroad. Inevitably, those whose countries were overrun and colonised by Moscow, notably Czech historians of the 1930s, were scarcely likely to go along with the suggestion that Russian behaviour was not uncommon in the history of international relations. The legitimate question to pose as to its uniqueness is what precisely motivated the Kremlin to act in this way.

Here Stalin was arguably a Marxist-Leninist in his ultimate objectives but a realist with respect to how to attain it. In other words he was a realist only in the sense that he followed Realpolitik, not the traditional Reasons of State that even the Tsars would have recognised as legitimate.

This, Kotkin understands very well. He also points out, exemplifying the ambivalent Soviet attitude to sanctions against Italian leader Mussolini during the Abyssinian Crisis (1935), that Stalin focused on what was known among the Bolsheviks as exploiting inter-imperialist contradictions (269).

In this respect Stalin was no different from all those around him. Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgii Chicherin reminded Stalin that “The war between the capitalist states allowed us to conquer power and to reinforce it, and any exacerbation of antagonisms—Germany-Entente, France-Italy, Italy-Yugoslavia, England-America—means a consolidation of our position, a reduction in dangers we face.”<sup>4</sup>

But this was just the overall philosophy of diplomacy that Lenin had laid out years before. It could be reduced to an entirely isolationist zero-sum game. It was not a strategy. The question that should concern us is, however, which policies were adopted within that framework and to what extent they allowed for a game in which others did not necessarily have to lose for the USSR to gain.

Of itself, exploiting inter-imperialist contradictions does not begin to explain what was going on in the fateful decade before the outbreak of the Second World War. And that is Kotkin’s difficulty, because he offers no further elaboration on the theme.

Several points need to be made.

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<sup>4</sup> Chicherin to Stalin, 23 March 1929: *Communisme* 65-66 (2001), 104.

First, the complete public about-face taken by the Soviet Government during the fateful year Adolf Hitler took power in 1933 from opposition to support for the Versailles Treaty system marked an utterly new departure for Moscow from the policy of working with Weimar Germany against the treaty system enshrined since 1922.

This reversal realigned the Soviet Union from the revisionist Powers, above all Germany, to the Entente Powers, most importantly France and its allies; plus, of course, the League of Nations in Geneva. As Germany left Geneva, the USSR arrived. This was an unprecedented departure, the impact of which is understated by Kotkin. And the arch realist Soviet Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov was its inspiration.

This is a point worth accentuating. Litvinov was no fool. He commanded near universal respect. More than once he risked his life standing up to Stalin and from 1937, from concern for a midnight visit, he refused to sleep in pyjamas and slept with a gun under his pillow. At the Party Conference early in 1941 he openly attacked as fallacious the policy adopted since August 1939 and finally lost his seat on the Central Committee. Others would have lost their heads for such a reckless display of courage. But Stalin looked ahead at uncertainty and kept Litvinov as a stone up his sleeve for meeting future needs (reconciliation with the democracies.)

Litvinov identified with the new policy of containing Germany because Berlin was unrelentingly hostile to Moscow. The policy shift was therefore the direct result of choices Hitler made, not Stalin.

Second, Litvinov could ensure the pursuit of collective security only if other governments joined in the venture and only if he could win over sceptics in Moscow. The latter depended crucially on the former.

The plain truth was that the policy Litvinov so zealously advocated was a matter of some contention within the Soviet Communist Party. It does not take much reading between the lines to see that Lazar Kaganovich, Vyacheslav Molotov, and later Andrei Zhdanov took the alternative view.

Molotov, very much a believer in world revolution, fixated on Germany and its possibilities for revolution. Molotov always took Comintern seriously, and, in the mid-twenties, contrary to Kotkin's insistence that Molotov was "untainted" by opposition to Stalin, he did fall out with Stalin on the latter's insistence that they could build socialism in one country. "He did not always agree with me," Molotov recalled, "but I must say he agreed about most things."<sup>5</sup> They continued to fall out over the years that followed, until in 1949 Stalin had had enough and abruptly dismissed him as Foreign Minister. He was ultimately saved only by Stalin's death in 1953.

Stalin's deep scepticism in the 1930s matched Litvinov's cynicism about the prospects for world revolution. Stalin also shared with Litvinov the crucial understanding that the working-class in the bourgeois West had too much to lose by revolution to contemplate it, even during the Great Depression. This is well attested by

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<sup>5</sup> *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym. Iz dnevnika F. Chueva* (Moscow: Terra, 1991), 370.

confidant Louis Fischer.<sup>6</sup> It is also what Stalin once told the future Comintern General Secretary Georgi Dimitrov in private.<sup>7</sup>

But whereas historians such as Carr concluded from this that Stalin was completely uninterested in spreading the revolution, it would be more accurate to say that Stalin believed in spreading the revolution only through force of Russian arms.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, Stalin was at the same time less sanguine than Litvinov about the prospects for collective security, just as he was tolerant of rather than enthusiastic about Dimitrov's embrace of the popular front against fascism in 1934-1935. Stalin appeared to have no fixed preference. At one time he backed the dogma that social democracy was social fascism (a complex story omitted from the biography but well researched in Germany).<sup>9</sup> At another, social democracy was amenable to change.

Yet the practical alternatives to what Dimitrov and Litvinov offered were non-existent, even though Stalin saw Litvinov, in particular, as too trusting of the British. Stalin therefore never put all his irons in the fire; through most of the thirties, however, he had nowhere else for them. The insurance policy was the emplacement of spies at the heart of the Cambridge establishment, a factor that receives less attention from Kotkin than it deserves because it reinforced Stalin's view that hostility to Russia was fundamentally ideological, which therefore meant that Litvinov's policy was predicated on an illusion. Hard though it might now be to believe, the British were obsessed with the danger of the fascist regimes in Germany as well as Italy falling apart and the resulting chaos bringing Bolshevism into the heart of Europe. All of the main actors on the British side, from Stanley Baldwin, through Lord Halifax and Neville Chamberlain himself were obsessively anti-Communist. And the fascist regimes were viewed in London as in Moscow as inherently unstable, politically and economically.

Moves had begun early in 1934 towards a treaty with France's allies (the Eastern Locarno) as the precondition to a fully-fledged alliance with France. This fundamental realignment could be seen as exploiting inter-imperialist contradictions; but the point is that it was being done in a direction not taken since the revolution.

The project for an Eastern Locarno failed because Poland under Marshal Piłsudski hastily succumbed to Hitler's entreaties. Romania, an ally of Poland, still had territory at issue with Russia and was under sustained threat from Warsaw that any backsliding in favour of Russia would reap untold consequences; therefore Romania also stood back. The rump that remained, in the end, was the alliance between Czechoslovakia and France, which signed up with the Russians in 1935; but without General Staff conversations these alliances

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics: An Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), 125.

<sup>7</sup> Conversation, 7 April 1934: *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov 1933-1949*, ed. I. Banac (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E.H. Carr, 1892-1982* (London: Verso, 1999), chapter 4, in particular.

<sup>9</sup> The best and most up to date on this is B. Hoppe, *In Stalins Gefolgschaft: Moskau und die KPD 1928-1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007).

were effectively a dead letter. Given the evident lack of enthusiasm among existing and potential allies for containing Hitler, Stalin would have been a fool not to keep trying for better relations with him on terms that would be mutually acceptable.

After complete disillusionment set in with the Munich conference in September 1938, reinforced by Hitler's unopposed invasion of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, the stage was set for a deal with the Germans, were they willing. An additional factor weighed in Stalin's considerations. To the East militarist Japan loomed large as an additional threat to Soviet security. The Russians were reading Japanese diplomatic and military communications; so for them Japanese plans were an open book.

In other words, although the Russians were set on exploiting inter-imperialist contradictions, strategy and tactics were entirely contingent upon the behavior of others. It is therefore ridiculous to contend, as some have done, that it was all about what Stalin decided, however evil he was. Foreign policy is not conducted in a closed encampment but in an international arena open to all. Kotkin's coverage of the road to the Nazi-Soviet pact in chapter 11 is thus eminently balanced. This decision, right or wrong, was surely a matter of Realpolitik. Striking the right balance of judgement is very unusual in this controversial field, and for this and not for this alone, the author is to be highly commended.

Review by Cynthia Roberts, Hunter College, CUNY and Columbia University

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The second volume of Stephen Kotkin's biography of Stalin is a monumental work which demands careful reading and will not soon be surpassed. Kotkin meticulously mines Soviet, Russian, and Western scholarship backed by archival research and, coupled with his own extensive reading of the available documents, succeeds in stitching together a riveting narrative. His context for Stalin's actions fuses geopolitics with ideological motivations and he vividly integrates all aspects of Soviet life—social, cultural, economic, political, foreign, and military. Although sprinkled with important insights about autocratic regimes, Kotkin's book avoids getting mired in historical debates or the scaffolding of hypothesis testing that is found in the social sciences. Kotkin is at his best when integrating what Stalin knew and sought to achieve given the constraints and opportunities that presented themselves. His Stalin is not a lazy, uninformed, wildly irrational tyrant, but a hardworking despot who sifted through mountains of reports from functionaries, Soviet agents, intelligence intercepts, and industrial technologists, and involved himself in the minutiae of policy. A gifted writer, Kotkin turns history into a page-turning thriller, showing Stalin to be brutal, purposeful, and cunning, though crucially not above major blunders, the worst, of course, in 1941 in failing to raise military readiness and oversee an effective plan to defend the country from the impending German attack.

The narrative is organized chronologically and so foreign and military policy concerns are interspersed with domestic preoccupations, including details about collectivization, the purges, and Stalin's ruthlessness in building a strong state and personal rule which was accompanied by "astonishing bloodletting" (378).

This review briefly considers three topics of special interest to International Relations (IR) scholars and military and diplomatic historians: (1) why Stalin found it difficult to ally (in IR parlance "balance") with the Western democracies against Nazi Germany and whether he perceived "internal balancing" through increased defense preparations a sufficient substitute;<sup>1</sup> (2) Stalin's role in, and lessons learned from, Soviet participation in small wars prior to 1941 and whether they contributed to improvements in combat effectiveness; and (3) Stalin's failures on the eve of war and their political-military context. Naturally, a full examination of these topics and related sources is beyond the scope of this paper. The objective here is to highlight key historical puzzles addressed in Kotkin's biography and Soviet foreign policy more broadly, and to identify some of the continuing controversies.

*Buck-passing versus Balancing through Collective Security*

For IR scholars, the 1930s is the paradigmatic case of buck-passing or "underbalancing" when states fail to ally in the face of a gathering threat to aggressively change the status quo, such as the one posed by Nazi Germany.<sup>2</sup> In the short run, when threats are still on the horizon and not yet compelling, states are reluctant

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44:2 (1990): 137-168. See also Norrin M. Ripsman and

to commit to security alliances that require costly and potentially dangerous commitments to others. Kotkin's fresh retelling of this period from Stalin's vantage point underscores the Soviet Union's isolation from the other great powers and the despot's preoccupation with avoiding a two-front war as the USSR faced not only German dictator Adolf Hitler, who was bent on territorial conquest, but also a revisionist Japan. Stalin's profound mistrust of and ideological revulsion for the imperialist countries, especially Great Britain, which he perceived as posing the most serious threat, was mutual.<sup>3</sup> Stalin's spy networks, notwithstanding their decimation by purges, brought him details of the negotiating positions of European states, from which he concluded that Britain (and France, which was by extension tied to London) sought to shift the cost of fighting Hitler to the Soviet Union.

Stalin did not oppose Hitler's revision of the Versailles status quo, "provided it did not come at Soviet expense" (254). Like the Western powers, he failed to grasp that Hitler's "revisionism was limitless," (675) preferring to believe that Germany and Soviet Russia could build on past cooperation started in the 1920s and expand a developing trade partnership that allowed the Soviet Union much-needed access to German military technology. Kotkin shows how Germany and the Soviet Union were central to each other's grand strategy but not in ways that allowed a durable alliance of autocrats. "For Hitler," according to Kotkin, "the Soviet Union was the principal evil, and Britain his principal wedge. For Stalin, Britain was the principal evil, and Germany his principal wedge." (255). Moreover, Paris courted Moscow, which London disliked, but mainly in order to gain British protection. For its part, Britain considered both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany to be evil, but its paramount strategic objective was to avoid the costs of a direct confrontation with Hitler.

Containing Germany through collective security looked unpromising to Stalin, not least because he found no evidence of a willing partner and was ignored by the Western powers at Munich. Stalin was stunned that British Prime Minister Neville "Chamberlain—who had handed Hitler Czechoslovakia" refused to allow the Soviet Union to "protect itself with microscopic territories, contiguous with the Soviet homeland, that until recently had belonged to Russia and that represented a threat" (648). Stalin was convinced that Britain would use negotiations with Moscow to obtain a deal with Hitler, and feared that the defection of Nazi official Rudolph Hess to the UK in 1941 was part of this conspiracy. Drawing on recent Russian sources, Kotkin paints a picture of a cautious Stalin who saw traps being laid by Britain and France to push Hitler eastward while they escaped the costs of fighting. He contemplated giving a binding military dimension to the USSR's mutual assistance pact with France, but recognized that Paris was limited by its primary tie to Britain, which opposed an extensive continental commitment that would drag it into another ground war on the continent.

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Jack S. Levy, "The Preventive War that Never Happened: Britain, France, and the Rise of Germany in the 1930s," *Security Studies* 16:1 (January-March 2007): 32-67.

<sup>3</sup> Kotkin's focus on Stalin supplements important previous treatments of Soviet foreign policy in this period. See especially, Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933-39* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Threat from the East, 1933-41: Vol. 3: Moscow, Tokyo and the Prelude to the Pacific War* (London: Macmillan, 1992); Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); and Silvio Pons, *Stalin and the Inevitable War: 1936-1941* (London: Frank Cass Press, 2002).



Stalin already knew before the military-to-military talks with Britain and France that commenced in Moscow on 11 August 1939 that the British believed they had no need for a pact with the USSR and that their emissary, Admiral Drax, had no authority to negotiate a military convention, while the French General Joseph Doumenc had no authority to sign one. After Soviet Defense Minister Kliment Voroshilov and Chief of the General Staff Boris M. Shaposhnikov detailed the large Soviet commitment that was on the table—up to 120 infantry division, 9,500 tanks, 5,000 artillery, etc.—the French claimed to have 110 available combat divisions while the British admitted they could commit about 5 (or more likely 2) divisions (658).<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the ideologically- rooted mistrust and a host of domestic factors that influenced underbalancing, Kotkin's reconstruction does not dislodge the basic insight that buck-passing obtained because the great powers had a shared reluctance to pay the costs of fighting a war to block Hitler. Thus, buck-passing persisted until, in Arnold Wolfers's proverbial analogy, the French and British houses were on fire.<sup>5</sup>

Stalin delighted in turning the tables on Britain and France in what Kotkin calls the “extended diplomatic three-card monte” after which “Stalin, not Chamberlain, had turned up the ‘Hitler’ card.” And so on August 23, German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop arrived in Moscow and by around 2:00 AM the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed in the Kremlin. Stalin toasted the Führer before the small group of Soviet and German diplomats, all the while mindful of the shock the Pact would cause. As they shared their “*Griff nach der Weltmacht* (at British expense)” moment, Ribbentrop was so elated that he suggested adding some text about “German-Soviet friendship.” But Stalin—showing that brutal despots sometimes are sensitive to audience costs—refused on account of public opinion, noting “[f]or many years now, we have been pouring buckets of shit over each other's head” (665). Germany invaded Poland eight days later, and in accordance with the Pact's secret protocols, Stalin moved later that month to take over eastern Poland, and annexed the Baltic States, Bessarabia, and northern Bukovina the following year. This was Stalin's preferred type of opportunistic low-risk, low-cost expansionism, but it also created a long shared border with the Third Reich.

Stalin's partnership with Nazi Germany hinged on his assumption that the war would be protracted because states were hard to conquer; in the IR conceptualization, he shared the common strategic belief that the prevailing military technology created a defensive-advantage, ruling out knock-out blows in the initial campaigns.<sup>6</sup> Kotkin recounts how Stalin had reassured Comintern head Georgi Dimitrov of his strategic logic, despite the Pact hitting world Communists like a shock wave; “A war is on between two groups of capitalist countries ... for the redivision of the world, for the domination of the world! We see nothing wrong

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<sup>4</sup> Kotkin notes that Soviet authorities did not fully appreciate that British military strength was in the air and on the sea, unlike the USSR which was a land power.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> For more on offense-defense advantages, see Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30:2 (1978): 167-214; and Christensen and Snyder, “Chain Gangs And Passed Bucks.” For an application to the Soviet Union, see Cynthia Roberts, “Prelude to Catastrophe: Soviet Security Policy between the Wars,” unpublished ms. In an important sense, the Soviet position was dichotomous, holding that a war between the Great Powers would be a protracted clash but characterized by periods of broad maneuver and deep offensive operations.

in their having a good fight and weakening each other” (671).<sup>7</sup> Of course, if defense had the advantage then how did this square with Soviet military theorists’ faith, shared by the despot, in modern technology’s potential for offensive “deep operations”? Stalin did not concern himself with such contradictions.

It hit Stalin like a bombshell, therefore, when, in the following spring, European countries fell like dominoes to German might and the Wehrmacht stormed through France in a mere six weeks. The Soviet Union’s strategic outlook changed radically, as Germany was strengthened instead of weakened from its military campaigns. As Kotkin recounts, Stalin was loathe to admit that now he faced Hitler from a position of inferiority. Berlin could even have conceivably finished the war in the West by invading Britain or reaching a peace settlement with London. Moreover (as discussed below), the contrast between the spectacular achievements of the Wehrmacht and the stumbling performance of the Red Army in Finland was painfully evident to both Stalin and the world.

Kotkin resists characterizing Stalin as shifting to appeasement after Hitler’s victories in the West and Germany’s newly dominant position in Europe, preferring to emphasize the mixed elements of attempted deterrence and economic interdependence. But he hints at this and shows how the despot’s various diplomatic moves backfired, for example in failing to develop a true British option in 1940 that might have given Moscow some diplomatic leverage<sup>8</sup> (810) and when he insisted on “forceful tactics” in Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav M. Molotov’s talks in Berlin in November 1940 while holding weak cards. Hitler interpreted even the unproductive Soviet-British dialog as hostile, and Molotov’s conditions for joining a four-power Axis pact as an attempt to pressure Germany, which deepens his resolve to eliminate Russia (804). Kotkin argues that “Stalin aimed not to intimidate Hitler but to demonstrate his continuing loyalty” (778) which Hitler interpreted as weakness. Although “Stalin fantasized about a new pact with Hitler” (804) in Kotkin’s view, not only did he overestimate his leverage with the newly dominant Berlin, he also “erred in not *testing* the real limits of a possible geopolitical pivot toward Britain” (818). Balancing with the UK might provoke Hitler to attack the USSR, but alternatively it might have given the Germans pause. Failing that, Stalin had to deal with the facts on the ground, including the new development that the Wehrmacht was moving into Finland, and had occupied Poland and Romania.

*Internal Balancing: Stalin’s Obsession with Military Technology and Armaments*

If a blocking coalition (external balancing) was unlikely to materialize in the 1930s, what about “internal balancing” as a means of deterring and checking aggressors? Some scholars suggest that great powers may adopt appeasement strategies internationally in order to buy time domestically for rearmament in order to

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<sup>7</sup> In 1935, Stalin had similarly observed during the crisis over Abyssinia “The worse the brawl between them, the better for the USSR. We can sell grain to one and the other, so they can fight. It is not at all advantageous for us now if one side smashes the other. For us it is advantageous for their brawl to be as long as possible, without a quick victory by one over the other” (269).

<sup>8</sup> Stalin remained firm in his belief that Britain wanted to avoid a fight, deflect Germany eastward and was ready to conclude a separate peace. Kotkin argues that “Stalin’s views on Britain and geopolitics bordered on incoherence. Steeped in Marxism-Leninism, he was given to dismissing the British ... as a supposed “nation of shopkeepers” ... yet he was also inclined to regard Britain as the arch-imperialist manipulating all world affairs. Germany, dominating nearly the entire continent, somehow still remained the victim of the Versailles order” (780).

bolster deterrence, or, if deterrence fails, to construct a viable defense.<sup>9</sup> Anticipating an inevitable conflict with the imperialist powers, the Soviet Union had undertaken a massive defense buildup in the 1930s even before Hitler came to power in 1933. Thus, in many respects, Kotkin's account of Soviet foreign and military policy supports the view of a leadership mistrustful of the imperialist powers and focused primarily on an internal drive to develop sufficient military capabilities for both security and expansion.<sup>10</sup>

Stalin was also obsessed with armaments, technology, and the defense industry. Kotkin catalogs in rich detail Stalin's involvement with military industry and the armed services, including his uncharacteristic written apology to Mikhail Tukhachevsky in 1932 for initially lambasting the famed officer's advocacy of an astronomical military modernization program as "red militarism" (96).<sup>11</sup> Tukhachevsky had argued that no modern army could prevail without large numbers of tanks, aircraft, chemical weapons, and airborne (parachute) infantry for greater mobility and success on the battlefield. His memorandum called for annual production of no less than 50,000 tanks and 40,000 airplanes, rising in the future to 197,000 tanks and 122,500 aircraft (51). Envious of the smart, worldly modernizers, Voroshilov had sent the original memorandum and Shaposhnikov's damning assessment to Stalin, noting that "Tukhachevsky wants to be original and . . . 'radical.'" Stalin replied, "You know that I greatly respect comrade Tukhachevsky as an especially capable comrade" (52).

The book charts familiar elements of the massive defense buildup and aspects of military doctrinal debates in the years prior to the German attack. Kotkin brings alive Stalin's role that has been hidden to all but the closest readers of Soviet memoirs and histories, disclosing colorful nuggets, such as Stalin's over-the-top shopping lists for German armaments and military technology as part of the expanding Soviet-German trade relationship after the sealing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

In another example related to the defense buildup's intended deterrent effect, Kotkin reports that while Deputy Führer and head of the Luftwaffe Hermann Göring was said to be hunting in 1935 in Poland as cover for serious diplomatic talks (Göring was also Reich Hunting Master), Stalin had the brilliant and world-respected Tukhachevsky give a thunderous speech to the 7th USSR Congress of Soviets. He revealed that the defense budget was rising to new heights and the 940,000 man army was developing "initiative" and "nerve" to employ the mobility of aviation, mechanized troops and tanks (223). Later that year, the Kiev military district under the command of another talented modernizer, Iona Yakir, put on a gigantic display of Soviet might in public exercises simulating a rapid counter-offensive with 65,000 troops, 10,000 tanks organized in mechanized corps, 600 aircraft, 1,188 parachutists, and 300 artillery pieces, covering an area of nearly 150 by 120 miles on the western border that was expected to impress the French and other foreign delegations (the

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<sup>9</sup> On the British case, see Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, "Wishful Thinking or Buying Time? The Logic of British Appeasement in the 1930s," *International Security* 33:2 (Fall 2008), 148-81.

<sup>10</sup> Soviet policy in the 1930s fits within various IR constructs. Besides internal balancing, states may pursue "bandwagoning" for the dual objectives of security and expansion. See Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19:1 (1994): 72-107.

<sup>11</sup> In 1930 Stalin had dismissed Tukhachevsky's "fantastic plan," concluding it would ruin both the economy and the army. Yet Kotkin points out that Stalin protected Tukhachevsky and others from being arrested in 1930, accused of harboring "rightist" sentiments as the head of a military plot. For the moment, Tukhachevsky and the others were useful, so Stalin instructed the OGPU to limit its actions to "maximally careful surveillance" (51-54).

Germans were not invited). When the real shooting started, however, Soviet exercises were typically set piece displays rather than realistic maneuvers designed to work out tactical and operational difficulties.

Not two years later, these stars of the Red Army and the crème of the military leadership were arrested and tortured into confessing to crimes they did not commit. Kotkin describes in bloody detail how the purges were micromanaged by Stalin, who made his case in June 1937 to an extraordinary closed-door session of the Main Military Council whose members were compelled to read interrogation protocols that Stalin had dictated and edited. He claimed that such abundant testimony showed “we have a military-political plot against Soviet power, stimulated and financed by German fascists.” Stalin charged the former tsarist officers and ‘bourgeois’ industrial specialists of succumbing to the “right deviation” and preferring capitalism. Mindful that the scale of arrests was unnerving, he also invoked current events, asserting that the Wehrmacht “wanted to make the USSR into a second Spain.” But seeking to reassure the remaining commanders, Stalin emphasized that “our army has a wealth of talent” and would promote young people to replace those removed (417-420).<sup>12</sup>

Dismissing the existence of military conspiracies and international pretexts, Kotkin’s account of the purges holds that such scenarios “constitute one of the oldest devices in the authoritarian handbook” that help “galvanize and recruit supporters, burnish regime legitimacy, and tighten central control.” He details Stalin’s immense bloodletting and brutality in graphic detail, starting with the collectivization-induced famine, and forthrightly acknowledges that “the breathtaking scope [of the purges], as well as the participation of the targeted, set Stalin’s actions apart” (430). It is worth being reminded when coming to terms with such brutality that even as thousands of officers were killed, the military failed to protect itself from this murderous rampage.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Kotkin shows that the purges not only swept away 90 percent of the top ranks at a time when the Soviet Union faced a shortage of good officers to train and lead conscripts, but also implemented this self-inflicted wound in full view of all of the USSR’s foreign enemies, which Stalin persistently sought to engage or deter (430-431). And then, in November 1938, Stalin suddenly moved to end the mass arrests (although arrests and killings continued on a smaller scale). Kotkin questions whether Stalin had “become less paranoid,” or was “jolted by events portending actual danger” [the Munich agreement which permitted Hitler to shift his borders eastward towards the USSR], concluding in a footnote that “Stalin’s fear of war seems to have ended the mass terror” (579 and note 145).

Juxtaposed against Stalin’s commitment to building up defense capabilities, the purges of the military underscore the tensions involved in simultaneously ensuring a loyal and an effective military. Nonetheless, Stalin discounted the effects of the purges and was keen to command respect as the leader of a great power with a large and impressive, modern army. Intuitively he expected that military power would bolster deterrence against other major powers and coercion of weaker states. Even after Germany had conquered

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<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere Kotkin specifies the numbers of those purges, but also notes that those removed in the top ranks represented only 0.5 of the huge Red Army, implying that Stalin might have seen available replacements. He adds the relevant statistic for building a mass army— that young people under the age of twenty-nine made up nearly half of the Soviet population, giving the USSR “one of the younger demographic profiles in the world” (7).

<sup>13</sup> Brian D. Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

most of Europe, Stalin reportedly retorted, “Hitler is not such a fool as to think that the Soviet Union is Poland, that it is France, that it is England, and even that it is all of them put together.”<sup>14</sup> The overall strength of the Soviet Armed Forces rose from 1.6 million in January 1928 to over 5 million men in mid-1941. In February 1941, Stalin confidently maintained that this was a force “that cannot be ignored in deciding questions of international relations, and therefore we can occupy a neutral position; we can achieve success in the area of foreign policy because we have a mighty army.”<sup>15</sup>

But could a massive army compensate for the lack of allies against Hitler? Could it be employed effectively in combat by a military leadership that had been decimated by the purges and a despot who arbitrarily intervened in decisions about armaments and operations and failed to appreciate that superior numbers and technology could not fully offset deficiencies in organization, strategy, and military professionalism? IR scholars underscore that the inclination of dictators to coup-proof their armies by putting loyalty over professionalism tends to have deleterious effects on combat effectiveness.<sup>16</sup> Although increased external threats and opportunities for expansion may incentivize leaders to adopt mechanisms that increase military professionalism, such as realistic combat training, replacing underperforming officers, and instituting improved command arrangements, there is no automatic equally weighted correlation of improvements to enhance combat effectiveness.<sup>17</sup> Other factors, such as organizational culture, unit cohesion, integrating new technologies and/or new military doctrines can also be decisive for levels of combat performance, although these are not quick fixes.<sup>18</sup>

Authoritarian regimes also vary in the tradeoffs they make among the mechanisms used to achieve tactical outcomes on the battlefield, including in their efficiency or relative tolerance of costs in terms of casualties to

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<sup>14</sup> G. K. Zhukov, *Vospominaniia i razmyshleniia*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo APN, 1990), vol. 1, 324.

<sup>15</sup> V. A. Malyshev, “Dnevnik narkoma,” *Vestnik* 5 (1997), in *Istochnik* 5 (1997), 115.

<sup>16</sup> This is a growing literature, but see in particular, Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Talmadge, “Different Threats, Different Militaries: Explaining Organizational Practices in Authoritarian Armies,” *Security Studies* 25:1 (2016): 111-141; Jessica L.P. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); and Dan Reiter, ed. *The Sword's Other Edge: Trade-offs in the Pursuit of Military Effectiveness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On military effectiveness, see Allan R. Millett, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth H. Watman, “The Effectiveness of Military Organizations,” in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, eds., *Military Effectiveness*, vol. 1, (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1988), 1-30.

<sup>17</sup> Talmadge, *Dictator's Army*; and Dan Reiter and William A. Wagstaff, “Leadership and Military Effectiveness,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2017), 1-22.

<sup>18</sup> Talmadge; Reiter and Wagstaff; Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Stephen Peter Rosen, “Military Effectiveness: Why Society Matters,” *International Security* 19:4 (1995): 5-31.

offset lack of skill and efficient implementation of the modern combined arms system.<sup>19</sup> The contrast between the high level of combat proficiency of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army's greater reliance on mass, exorbitant casualty levels, and harsh control mechanisms, such as "blocking detachments" to stop flight and mass desertion, is telling.<sup>20</sup> In his comparative take on the differing German and Soviet approaches to ensuring loyalty, Kotkin pointedly observes that senior German officers like Werner von Blomberg and Werner von Fritsch, who were forced out were given pensions so that "[t]he Führer was supreme in the military sphere, and the SS was ... allowed to create its own armed force of up to 600,000 men—but without mass hysteria, let alone mass murder" (473-475).

*The Soviet Union's Limited Wars before 1941*

Large armed forces by themselves do not necessarily deter aggressors, and as the Soviet Union discovered in the years preceding the German invasion, a reputation for combat weakness may tempt adversaries while putting off potential allies. Stalin learned this lesson the hard way following the purges and particularly after the Soviet debacle in the war against Finland in 1939-1940. Kotkin's book encompasses the five limited wars prior to the German attack, starting with the Soviet intervention in the Spanish Civil War and continuing through two engagements against Japan at Lake Khasan (Zaozernaya, in Russian; Changkufeng, in Chinese) in 1938 and along the Halha River (Khalkhin Gol/Nomonhan) in 1939, the Soviet attack on Poland (starting on 17 September 1939, following Germany's invasion on September 1), and especially the Soviet "Winter War" against Finland (1939-1940).<sup>21</sup> Soviet participation in these wars is of interest to IR scholars who are keen to examine the sources of combat effectiveness within regimes over time as well as variations among them. Kotkin's vignettes are a strength of the book and valuable starting point, especially for readers unfamiliar with recent Russian and Western military histories.

Kotkin shows that Stalin was cautious in Spain, committing only a relatively small contingent, reflecting Moscow's limited stakes.<sup>22</sup> Russian casualties were also low. However, in both campaigns against the Japanese in 1938 and 1939, the fighting was a preview of worse problems to come for the Red Army—disorganization, inadequate preparation, and dysfunctional intervention from Moscow. In a pattern that repeated itself, the Soviets prevailed through superior numbers and willingness to pay high costs, in these cases for limited gains; after 1941 for the Soviet Union's very survival. Kotkin recounts how, at Lake Khasan, NKVD border troops worked at cross purposes with the Far Eastern Commander Vasily Blyukher's army contingent while Japan's

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<sup>19</sup> Dan Reiter, "Confronting Tradeoffs in Pursuit of Military Effectiveness," in *The Sword's Other Edge*, 4-5; Reiter and Wagstaff, "Leadership and Military Effectiveness;" and Biddle, *Military Power*.

<sup>20</sup> Reiter; Reiter and Wagstaff. For one measure, German casualties in the campaigns against the Low Countries and France "were less than half of those the Kaiser's army had suffered at the battle of Verdun in 1916. Verdun had ended in stalemate; the 1940 campaign had made Germany master of the West." John Keegan and Richard Holmes, *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle* (New York: Viking, 1986), 35. On blocking detachments, see Jason Lyall, "Forced to Fight," in Reiter, *Sword's Other Edge*, chap. 4.

<sup>21</sup> This section draws on Roberts, *Prelude to Catastrophe*, especially chaps. 6-8.

<sup>22</sup> In Spain, in addition to roughly 500 Soviet military advisers about 1,500 Soviet combat personnel saw duty, including 772 pilots and 351 tank operators, small numbers compared with the 19,000 Germans and 80,000 Italians who fought.

Kwantung Army, intruding on the jurisdiction of the Japanese Korean Army, spoiled for a fight and got one. Fearing that Japan was testing his resolve after Soviet forbearance in 1937 and perceived weakness owing to the purges (which had been broadcast by a Soviet defector), Stalin threatened Blyukher into rushing into an assault without his full complement of men, producing a Soviet bloodbath and Blyukher's removal (537-538).

Kotkin is often at his best in giving the key back stories and biographical details, which in Blyukher's case was his renown in the Far East as the "Red Napoleon" for his brilliant 1929 operation against the Chinese in Manchuria. This campaign made Stalin "ecstatic" and earned the Far Eastern Army the Order of the Red Banner (30-31). Almost a decade later, after Blyukher had been promoted as one of five Marshals of the Soviet Union, he was envied and reviled by Voroshilov and an NKVD rival, and, like Tukhachevsky and Yakir, became a political threat by virtue of his independent mind and meritorious rise. Blyukher was now far more vulnerable, blamed for Lake Khasan's high casualties and dysfunctions, accused of being a Japanese spy since 1922 and then tortured to death, without ever confessing to the false allegations (549-550). Meanwhile, after a renewed "massive" Soviet air and land attack, but before the Kwantung Army could reinforce its units, Stalin agreed to a ceasefire (535-540).

An "after action report" and subsequent address to the Main Military Council (GVS) by Grigory Shtern, Blyukher's replacement, revealed serious deficiencies – artillery batteries had turned up at the front without shells, one entire rifle unit arrived without rifles while others were without shoes or overcoats. Not only did commanders not know the real or authorized strength of their units, but all forces showed an "inability to operate on the battlefield, to maneuver, or concentrate action and fire."<sup>23</sup> Significantly, tanks were initially used as infantry support and in a direct assault role, which exposed them to fortified Japanese artillery, before switching to small group infiltration tactics.<sup>24</sup> There was little effective coordination let alone combined arms operations. Even Voroshilov admitted such weaknesses (though without personal culpability, as Kotkin notes) and exclaimed that the Red Army had failed its enshrined tenet to "defeat the enemy with little loss of blood."<sup>25</sup> Tragically for the millions who subsequently perished, this would remain an empty slogan.

Many historians, including Kotkin, treat the second major Soviet encounter with Japan in disputed territory along the Mongolian-Manchurian border more favorably, both as a logistical feat and as the promising debut of Georgy Zhukov, the bold commander who embraced armor and persistently seized the initiative to prevail in battle. Then the Deputy Commander of the Belorussian military district, Zhukov was a peasant's son who had distinguished himself fighting for Tsarist Russia before joining the Reds in summer 1918 and fighting in the illustrious First Cavalry Army (associated with Stalin and his cronies Voroshilov and the cavalry commander S.M. Budennyi). Recommended by Shaposhnikov, Voroshilov sent Zhukov to settle Russian scores with the Japanese on the Halha River. In one of his early major engagements on the Noro Heights at Bain Tsagan, Zhukov repulsed a Kwantung Army ground offensive, but in his determination to save a key

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<sup>23</sup> Shtern also noted that the purges had swept away 75 percent of the command staff of the Far Eastern army. Protocol No. 18 (31 August 1938), "Zasedaniia Glavnogo Voennogo Soveta RKKA," RGVA, f. 4, op. 18, d. 46. l. 183-190; RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 1136, l. 109, and the discussion in Roberts, *Prelude to Catastrophe*, chap. 7.

<sup>24</sup> RGVA, f. 4, op. 18, d. 47, l. 6 - 37.

<sup>25</sup> RGVA, f. 4, op. 18, d. 46.

bridgehead, he threw tank and armored brigades into battle from a march, without infantry support, resulting in heavy losses. Japanese tank-killer squads “bagged” the scattered Soviet tanks one by one with firebombs in close combat. In the fierce (over 100° F) sun, even unlit bottles of gasoline were incinerating Soviet armor. Zhukov (and his critics) recalled the horror of watching tanks burn before his very eyes.<sup>26</sup>

Kotkin labels Zhukov’s subsequent August offensive a “crushing military display,” and indeed the Soviet commander prepared carefully and amassed a significant superiority in armor, artillery and fighter planes by using thousands of trucks to haul the materiel across 400-miles from the railhead to the battlefield (667). The narrative underscores the “the scale and firepower of mechanized corps” and praises how Zhukov “managed the feat of coordinating combined tank, motorized infantry, artillery, and aircraft warfare,” reflecting a “sophistication of strategy, tactics, and generalship” (668-669).

However, Russian army archival documents suggest that this conventional wisdom is something of an exaggeration. Nothing at Khalkhin Gol provides direct evidence on the question of large modern combined-arms formations in continuous combat. On a smaller scale, Zhukov had demonstrated that aircraft and armor could be used for an envelopment. But Zhukov used at least half his armor in the infantry support role, primarily in tank battalions (not larger formations) coupled with infantry regiments.<sup>27</sup> His mobile forces were essentially armored car brigades and cavalry stiffened by tanks. The attack plan was a set of concentric encirclements, fixing the Japanese center while tank-infantry formations crushed the wings and armored cars drove around flanks (which the Japanese had intentionally left open<sup>28</sup>) to disrupt the Japanese rear. Not only did it take time to crush the Japanese forces, but the preparations leading up to the Soviet offensive were also lengthy. This gradual buildup may have reinforced the prevailing assumption in the defense commissariat and General Staff that wars between strong states would not start with the engagement of main forces, an assumption wholly at odds with German military doctrine. Also importantly, the use of armor at Khalkhin Gol gave no evidence about the viability of the tank corps; in fact, Zhukov even split up his tank brigades into battalions. Thus, instead of demonstrating a supposed contradiction between Zhukov’s successful use of armor at Khalkhin Gol and the November 1939 decision to abandon the tank corps as an independent formation,<sup>29</sup> Zhukov’s use of tanks indirectly supported the decision, though it preserved independent tank brigades as reserves of the high command. Finally, although Zhukov ultimately prevailed in clearing the entire

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<sup>26</sup> Zhukov to Simonov, K.M. Simonov, “Zametki k biografii G.K. Zhukova,” *Voenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal (VIZh)* 10 (1987), 60; and Alvin D. Coox, *Nomonhan. Japan against Russia, 1939*, vol. 2 (Stanford University Press, 1985), 309-342.

<sup>27</sup> See for example, RGVA, f. 32113, op. 1, d. 211, l. 5ff.

<sup>28</sup> On this point, see Coox, *Nomonhan*, 575.

<sup>29</sup> John Erickson, *Soviet High Command, 1918-1941* (Macmillan, 1962), 537; Coox, *Nomonhan*, 995-996; and Amnon Sella, “Khalkhin-Gol: The Forgotten War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18:4 (1983), 679. Edward J. Drea misleadingly titles the relevant chapter in his monograph ‘Soviet Style Blitzkrieg.’ See his *Nomonhan: Japanese-Soviet Tactical Combat, 1939*, Leavenworth Paper no. 2 (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, January 1981). I discuss the debates over and the fate of the tank corps in Roberts, *Prelude to Catastrophe*.



Halha River of Japanese by brute force, this action was effected with “no regard to costs” with the Red Army losing nearly 40 percent of its deployed manpower (669).<sup>30</sup>

*The Soviet Invasion of Poland*

Kotkin astutely characterizes the Soviet land grab of Polish regions in September 1939 as “Stalin’s Sudetenland” since the new border corresponded to the line suggested by Lord Curzon (687). It also denied Hitler all of Poland and a potential pressure point against Moscow to surrender Soviet Ukraine for “unification” with a puppet state in eastern Poland (687-691). Although the cost to the Poles and the country’s huge Jewish population would prove devastating, Soviet casualties were relatively small, about 700. Nonetheless, everywhere there was evidence of difficulties in command and control, especially of the tank corps, which was unable even to keep pace with the Soviet cavalry, although it encountered little Polish resistance. Multiple command reports from the field attest that the Soviet armored forces suffered from serious weaknesses in leadership, command, traffic discipline, vehicle maintenance, and logistics.<sup>31</sup> There was an inordinate degree of confusion and disorder. From the standpoint of combat effectiveness, the Soviet invasion of Poland more closely resembled the disarray and improvisation of Hitler’s Anschluss, which similarly included mobilization foul-ups, German tank breakdowns, and poor march discipline.<sup>32</sup>

Although the topic is beyond Kotkin’s purview, the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland highlighted all of the negative features of the Red Army’s tank corps just two months before the Main Military Council (GVS) convened to consider changing the organizational structure of the tank troops. The GVS could hardly ignore the problems with these large armored formations, and, with Stalin’s concurrence, directed their disbanding. Although historians are divided on the merits (Kotkin seems in favor of the tank corps), Soviet combat experience from Spain to Poland, including Khalkhin Gol, suggests they were too large and tank-heavy for Soviet commanders to employ on the battlefield. In this view, the Soviet mistake was to resurrect the tank corps in the middle of 1940 after the successful German use of panzer divisions in France (which were more rationally structured and well-led), an error that was recognized only after Germany invaded. Hence in July 1941 they were disbanded and replaced with a down-sized brigade. Larger armored formations were not reintroduced until 1942, and it was not until the battle of Kursk in July 1943 and into 1944 that the Red Army began to demonstrate mastery of armored warfare.

It’s unclear from Kotkin’s account whether Stalin paid any attention to such operational deficiencies after the Soviet “promenade” into Poland. However, at a “lessons learned” conference after the Soviet-Finnish war (17 April 1940) Stalin lamented the false expectation that the army could “bag an easy win,” since “[w]e were

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<sup>30</sup> Kotkin cites secondary sources with figures tallying the Red Army’s killed in action as 9,703 and 15,952 wounded, and Japan suffering 18,000 casualties (8,000 killed, 8,800 wounded, 1,200 sick), while referring the reader to other numbers for Soviet losses in G. F. Krivosheev, ed., *Grif sekretnosti sniat’: Poteri Vooruzhennykh Sil SSSR v voynakh, boevykh deistviakh i voennykh konfliktakh* (Voenizdat, 1993), 77-85.

<sup>31</sup> Not surprisingly, the confusion in the armored forces reflected the general chaos that plagued the entire invasion. See for example, RGVA, f. 37977, op. 1, d. 408, l. 6-15.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts, *Prelude to Catastrophe*, chap. 7; and Manfred Messerschmidt, “German Military Effectiveness between 1919 and 1939,” in Millett and Murray, *Military Effectiveness*, vol. II: *The Interwar Period*, 237-248.

terribly spoiled by the Polish campaign” (753). Scapegoating his crony Voroshilov, Stalin focused blame on a Civil-War cult and cavalry charges instead of mastering employment of the modern arms of tanks, aviation and artillery.

Kotkin’s description of the Soviet invasion of Poland highlights the geopolitical angles and especially the apparent roots of Stalin’s misperceptions of German civil-military relations. When German forces crossed the agreed dividing lines with the USSR and Stalin insisted they retreat, German commanders were angered by the Führer’s orders to comply. Stalin mistakenly learned from these episodes that Hitler was a reliable partner while the Wehrmacht was prone to over-reach.

*Stalin’s Debacle in Finland, 1939-1940*

Kotkin appropriately devotes the most attention of the five limited wars (nearly all of Chapter 12) to the attack on Finland, which showed both Stalin and the rest of the world that military superiority could not guarantee easy success on the battlefield and also the negative impact of the purges on combat effectiveness. Moreover, unlike some of the other cases, the Soviet dictator was directly implicated in the Red Army’s debacle in Finland. Stalin personally overruled Shaposhnikov’s plan for a “massive invasion force” to smash Finnish defenses in a campaign of several months as “unworthy of a great power” (726). He turned control over to Kirill Meretskov, the commander of the Leningrad military district with instructions to develop a leaner plan for an offensive by 12 divisions to be concluded “in a mere twelve to fifteen days.” Instead of a concentrated assault along a narrow front, the revised war plan spread out the attack across the entire 800-mile border (726).<sup>33</sup>

After the Pact settled the fate of the other East European states and Bessarabia, Stalin remained concerned about the security of the USSR’s northwestern borders, especially an attack on Leningrad by Germany. The Baltic states and Finland preferred neutrality but, if push came to shove, would side with Berlin over Moscow. Stalin gave every indication of an over-optimism bias that war would be easy and victory quick despite objective conditions and constraints. Kotkin astutely judges that “[w]ith Finland... he would end up taking a largely unprepared gamble, and without realizing he was doing so” (705). Against the 120,000 man Red Army force that rumbled across the frontier on November 30, the Finns not only took advantage of prepared defenses and record low cold temperatures but also displayed tactical sophistication in embracing asymmetric warfare, striking the Soviet flanks and rear as entire Red Army divisions were sliced to pieces, starving and frozen (725-727). Two weeks later Stalin ordered Beria to create NKVD blocking regiments to interdict retreating Soviet soldiers (731).

As disaster unfolded, realism set in and by late December, Stalin convened the Main Military Council which he had previously bypassed. Meretskov’s failed plan was severely criticized and when Stalin asked who would

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<sup>33</sup> Kotkin assesses Stalin’s objectives in Finland to be limited but acknowledges in Note 62 (Chap. 12) that “Stalin’s ultimate aims are not spelled out in internal Soviet documents. We are left, like the Finns, to deduce his aims from his statements in the negotiations, and, above all, from his actions.” Although ambiguity exists, my reading of the Soviet war plans against Finland supports the hypothesis that Stalin’s objectives went beyond a narrow territorial settlement. Operativnoe upravlenie shtaba Leningradskogo voennogo okruga, “Plan operatsii protiv Finliandii v 1939 gody,” RGVA, f. 25888, op. 14, d. 2, l. 1-14.

take over, Timoshenko volunteered on the condition that he could revert to the original war plan developed by Shaposhnikov and the General Staff. Stalin also agreed to other reforms to improve combat effectiveness, mindful that “[t]he whole world is watching us... If we get stuck in the face of such a weak opponent, that will arouse the anti-Soviet forces of imperialist circles” (736). However, Timoshenko’s February offensive relied heavily on massive artillery assaults and more than 450,000 Soviet troops to pierce the Mannerheim Line and break through a force of about 150,000 Finns to open the road to Helsinki and Finnish capitulation (743-746). Soviet dead and missing for the three and a half month campaign rose to 131,476 with at least another 264,908 more casualties. Total Soviet losses reached about 400,000 casualties, of perhaps 1 million men mobilized, or almost 4,000 casualties per day.<sup>34</sup>

Finland’s Field Marshal Mannerheim, a former tsarist officer, grasped that the Red Army had reproduced the shortcomings of the tsarist army. As Kotkin observes, Mannerheim zeroed in on the truth that “The Russians based their art of war on the weight of material, and were clumsy, ruthless, and extravagant.” The Red Army might be a “determined fighting machine” but the Russians were inefficient in combat, over-relied on their immense brute power and NKVD detachments to block retreats and contain defections (750). The German general staff similarly concluded that the Red Army was “in quantity a gigantic military instrument,” but “the Russian ‘mass’ is no match for an army with modern equipment and superior leadership” (748).

After Finland, Kotkin sides with those historians who detect evidence of tactical learning and serious reforms.<sup>35</sup> The book recounts some important adjustments that were made both during the Winter War and afterward—e.g., underperforming officers, such as Meretskov, were replaced, Voroshilov was promoted out of the position of defense minister, directives were issued to improve combat training, and discipline was tightened (758). But all was not put right—the strategically smart Shaposhnikov was replaced as head of the general staff by the failed Meretskov (who was replaced by Zhukov on 1 February 1941, who was replaced again by Shaposhnikov in July after the outbreak of war). At the same time, Stalin left in high positions such unfit petty tyrants as Lev Z. Mehlis, Grigory I. Kulik, and Efim A. Shchadenko who did incomparable damage to military preparedness. Even Voroshilov had removed the troublesome Kulik from interfering with Zhukov at Khalkhin Gol, and ensured unity of command by restructuring the forces to fall under his command. Overall, it is questionable whether such measures were sufficient to offset other deficiencies that lowered combat effectiveness. Ultimately, the Soviet Union had adequate manpower to achieve its tactical goals by paying a significantly higher cost in casualties than a more efficient army would have.

The scale of the military purges had an important impact on performance, but many of the problems that were endemic to the organizational culture of the Red Army were more deep-seated and intractable and these worked against efficiency and self-assessment. Voroshilov captured the problem well in remarks to the Military Soviet in December 1934: “Yes, we are strong and have great technology....but we are poor organizers....We have yet to instill in ourselves German efficiency; [nor have we] consistency in conduct,

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<sup>34</sup> Kotkin, 748, citing Krivosheev, *Grif sekretnosti sniat*, 93-126 (especially 125) and RGVA documents.

<sup>35</sup> Compare, for example, the assessments by Carl Van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland, 1939-40* (London: Frank Cass, 1997) and Roger Reese, *Why Stalin’s Soldiers Fought: The Red Army’s Effectiveness in World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

disposition or self-motivation. We would prefer to sit for 15 hours at a table in a smoke-filled room than work intensely....”<sup>36</sup>

Despite its greater numbers, superior equipment, and brave soldiers, unlike the Wehrmacht, the Red Army lacked an institutional insistence on critical analysis as a means to improve combat performance. The significance of this factor is demonstrated by differences in combat performance and the different reactions of the two armies to their respective combat experiences. Kotkin delivers the math: “It had taken Stalin 105 days to subdue the Finnish nation; it had taken Hitler less than half that time to subdue a nation ten times the size.” Moreover, German casualties in France were fewer than 50,000 dead and wounded (768).

After the Anschluss, which, as mentioned, bears a striking resemblance to the Red Army’s venture into Poland in 1939, the German army high command engaged in detailed self-criticism to correct deficiencies and weaknesses. The training program that followed paid handsome dividends during the Polish campaign. There followed rigorous analysis of the lessons learned in Poland to improve rather than justify existing doctrine and to raise performance standards in the army, which helped ensure success in France. As Williamson Murray observes, “Nothing better indicates why the Wehrmacht was so superior to its opponents than the reassessment through which the army went after the Polish campaign.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, in the first years of the Second World War, the Wehrmacht went from strength to strength. By comparison, the Red Army continued to flounder in basic questions of military organization and doctrine. This was true even before the purges, as many important tactical problems remained unresolved and the 1936 field regulations (PU-36) had the markings of a log-rolled document. Beneath the veneer of consensus lurked competing views on how Soviet forces should be structured for battle and how battles should be fought and won using the modern armaments the USSR was acquiring in such huge numbers. Kotkin quotes Stalin as acknowledging blame for Finland, but more important was the fact that he still had a poor grasp of operational art and never understood tactics.<sup>38</sup>

In his retrospective of Soviet combat experience in the limited wars prior to 1941, Kotkin shows important deficiencies in the qualitative mechanisms through which the Soviet armed forces attempted to convert resources into combat power. To prevail, Stalin was willing to accept tradeoffs that emphasized mass and brutality, paying higher costs in casualties than would have been necessary for a more efficient modern army.

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<sup>36</sup> RGVA, f. 33987, op. 3, d. 641, l. 17.

<sup>37</sup> Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power*, 147-153 and 338-340, quotation at 338. See also Murray, “The German Response to Victory in Poland;” and Manfred Messerschmidt, “German Military Effectiveness between 1919 and 1939,” in Millett and Murray, *Military Effectiveness*, vol. II: *The Interwar Period*, 237-248.

<sup>38</sup> According to Zhukov, Stalin had a grasp of strategy but at the outset of the war, he “had a poor understanding of operational art.” Zhukov adds that Stalin did not understand tactics until the very end of the war. Simonov, “Zametki k biografii G. K. Zhukova.” Volkogonov reports that Stalin did not request a copy of the Red Army’s new Field Service Regulations until shortly before the war broke out. Dmitrii Volkogonov, *Triumfi tragediia*, Bk. 1, Pt. 2, 134.

*Stalin's Failures on the Eve of War*

Soviet war plans since the early 1930s recognized the prospect of war with Germany, but in 1941 the Soviet Union unexpectedly faced a menacing, efficient German war machine on its western frontier, coiled to launch a war of conquest and annihilation.<sup>39</sup> This was a classic deterrence/defense problem, and the Kremlin and General Staff received ample military intelligence about the threat to necessitate strengthening the country's security and increasing the readiness of the armed forces. Yet in one of the most important puzzles of Soviet history, Stalin resisted most measures that were encouraged by the senior military command to increase readiness and clung to the belief that war could be avoided. The Soviet despot categorically declared: "if we do not provoke Hitler, there will not be war"<sup>40</sup> and ordered the military to conform to this non-provocative stance.<sup>41</sup>

On this question, Kotkin offers no smoking gun, unearths no previously unknown documents to resolve the contradictions inherent in Soviet behavior. His interpretation is previewed in the subheading of the book: "Waiting for Hitler." Kotkin's Stalin was increasingly fearful and reactive, not excited about executing an offensive knockout blow against Germany. Like other notable historians, Kotkin dismisses persistent unsubstantiated claims that Stalin was preparing his own offensive that was pre-empted by the German invasion.<sup>42</sup> It is true that Soviet war planning had long envisioned bold offensives westward against the imperialist powers under favorable conditions. However, revisionist writers who, in contrast to Kotkin and others, see only Soviet offensive-mindedness miss the key point that in the spring of 1941 Stalin was fixated on avoiding war, not launching a pre-emptive strike or strategic offensive. When Zhukov and Timoshenko proposed a preemption option, Stalin's fear about triggering an inadvertent German attack reportedly led to an emotional outburst: "What, have you lost your mind? You want to provoke the Germans?" (870).

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<sup>39</sup> Jürgen Förster, "Das Unternehmen 'Barbarossa' als Eroberungs- und Vernichtungskrieg," in Horst Boog, et al. *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg* Bd. 4: Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1983), 413-447.

<sup>40</sup> As cited in *Kommunist*, 24 January 1989, 70. Kotkin points out that ten days after Hitler signed Directive No. 21 (Operation Barbarossa) on 18 December 1940, Soviet military intelligence in Berlin reported its existence (824). He also catalogs the preparations and troop movements that Stalin did allow, but a case can be made that many of these developments were self-defeating and in any event did not significantly change the odds of the impending disaster or save lives.

<sup>41</sup> I explore these puzzles in Cynthia A. Roberts, "Planning for War: The Red Army and the Catastrophe of 1941," *Europe-Asia Studies* 47:8 (1995): 1293-1326; C.A. Roberts, "Oshibki Stalina i Krasnoi Armii Nakanune Voiny" [Stalin and the Red Army: Mistakes on the Eve of War] in A.O. Chubarian, et al., eds., *Voyna i Politika, 1939-1941* [War and Politics, 1939-1941] (Moscow: Nauka, 1999), 226-243; and Roberts, *Prelude to Catastrophe*, chap. 9. See also Evan Mawdsley, "Crossing the Rubicon: Soviet plans for offensive war in 1940-1941," *The International History Review* 25:4 (2003): 818-865.

<sup>42</sup> Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Mif Ledokola* (Moscow: Progress, 1995); Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion*; and Mawdsley, "Crossing the Rubicon."

Crucially, Stalin gravely misjudged Hitler as well as the kind of threat he faced. In Stalin's view, if war came in 1941 it would not be the result of Germany's premeditated aggressive intentions but rather a preemptive response to some inadvertent provocation. Because his threat identification was incorrect, he adopted the wrong remedy. A premeditated attack is best deterred by counter-mobilization and a strong defense.<sup>43</sup> Stalin was perhaps also misled by the false analogy to the precedent of World War I, when the Tsar's mobilization provoked a counter-mobilization by the Kaiser, thereby making war inevitable.<sup>44</sup> Consistent with this misperception, Stalin believed that British warnings of a German invasion were designed to provoke a Soviet mobilization that would force Germany to attack.<sup>45</sup>

Just as astoundingly, despite Stalin's adherence to a war-avoidance, non-provocative posture, the bulk of the Red Army hewed to its offensive doctrine, and thus was forward deployed and vulnerable to swift encirclement and destruction by the Wehrmacht. Although Kotkin appreciates Stalin's preoccupation with avoiding war in 1941, his insistence on the integration of Soviet political-military doctrine leaves this puzzle only partly explained in the book. In fact, the Red Army's planning assumptions were completely out of sync with Stalin's German policy in 1941, which increasingly bordered on appeasement.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the High Command's own culpability rests with the military's recklessly ambitious war plans grounded in a deeply flawed conception of the initial period of war. Soviet planners underestimated the military might Germany could concentrate in an assault on the USSR while greatly overestimating the Red Army's own operational potential to conduct counter-offensives, let alone major offensive operations, and neglected strategic defense.<sup>47</sup> Thus, when the German army struck the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, both Stalin and the military leadership were staggered by the crushing impact of the assault.

Kotkin dramatically sets the stage for the impending disaster and takes the reader through the interplay of the different elements. Particularly notable is his review of the state of Soviet intelligence which summarizes not only what Stalin read, the proclivity of many (not all) intelligence operatives to distill information to conform to his biases, but above all how German disinformation amplified two of the despot's mistaken beliefs,

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<sup>43</sup> Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack. Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1982), 144-145. See also David Holloway "Barbarossa and the Bomb: Two Cases of Soviet Intelligence in World War II," in Jonathan Haslam and Karina Urbach, eds., *Secret Intelligence in the European States System, 1918-1989*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 36-80.

<sup>44</sup> W. Averell Harriman, "Stalin at War," in G.R. Urban, ed., *Stalinism: Its Impact on Russia and the World* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), 41. See also Roberts, "Oshibki Stalina i Krasnoi Armii Nakanune Voiny."

<sup>45</sup> Simonov, "Zametki k biografii," *VIZh*, no. 9, 1987, 53. The Rudolph Hess landing in Britain fed these fears. These misperceptions are discussed in Roberts, "Oshibki Stalina i Krasnoi Armii Nakanune Voiny."

<sup>46</sup> On this question Kotkin writes: "Stalin's dealings with Hitler differed from British appeasement in that he tried significant deterrence as well as accommodation, and he took as much as he gave. But Stalin's policy resembled British appeasement in that he was driven by a blinding desire to avoid war at all costs" (905).

<sup>47</sup> Soviet military planners blindly assumed that there would be several weeks to mobilize and concentrate Red Army forces before the main engagements started, although German experience from Poland to France demonstrated otherwise. Roberts, "Planning for war," 1294 ff; and Roberts, *Prelude to Catastrophe*.

impairing a rational response to the German troop concentrations massing in Eastern Europe. The first was that Hitler intended to use the forces concentrated on the border to pressure Stalin into yielding territory and/or resources. This ruse, which came to resemble an article of faith, held that the Führer would demand “concessions” and then deliver an “ultimatum.”<sup>48</sup> Stalin was therefore loathe to take any measures that risked transforming German coercion into aggression. Second, Germany spread disinformation attributed to the high command or the Führer that a two-front war against Britain and the USSR was “impossible, suicidal.” Paradoxically, Hitler calculated that escape from a two-front war required knocking out the USSR before the United States joined Britain to fight in the west (838).<sup>49</sup> Stalin lacked an agent in Hitler’s innermost circle or personal staff who could have exposed the disinformation campaign (837).

A third erroneous belief about German civil-military relations also apparently shaped Stalin’s insistence on avoiding all provocations. As noted above, according to Kotkin, Stalin developed the opinion that Hitler acted as a restraint on German militarists in the Wehrmacht, as had been illustrated when German combat units overreached the agreed borders in Poland as specified in the Pact and were ordered to retreat. Relatedly, Stalin believed that the German leadership was divided on the material benefits of continued engagement with the Soviet Union and that such divisions would delay a decision of whether even to go to war against Moscow, while reinforcing demands for concessions.

In the end, after the war’s cataclysmic initial period, the Red Army, the tactically inferior force, fought its way into Berlin and victory in 1945 at a staggering cost of 27 million Soviet (military and civilian) lives while the Wehrmacht, operationally the most effective army on the battlefield, failed to achieve Hitler’s gamble of a lightning war of annihilation. It helped that Stalin had averted one strategic nightmare, a simultaneous two-front war against Japan in the Far East. We know how the “Great Patriotic War” ended but still eagerly anticipate volume 3 of Kotkin’s towering biography to learn how Stalin struggled to come back from initial catastrophe in 1941 to victory, acquiring significant territory across eastern Europe, and then took the USSR into the nuclear age and Cold War.

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<sup>48</sup> The strength of Stalin’s misperception was widely noticed. Averell Harriman observed that Stalin “could not believe that Hitler would attack without talking to him again because he was ready to make further concessions.” Harriman, “Stalin at War,” 41. Molotov echoed this aspect of Stalin’s expectations. F. Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym* (Moscow: Terra, 1991), 41-43.

<sup>49</sup> Stalin was especially susceptible because he constantly worried about the USSR facing a two-front war without any allies and the prospect that Britain might join one or both. Stalin told Anthony Eden that the world situation was worse than it had been on the eve of the Great War, “because in 1913 there was only one source of the threat of war—Germany—and presently there are two such sources, Germany and Japan” (643, Note 9).