

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXIV-5

Sean McMeekin. *Stalin's War: A New History of World War II*. New York: Basic Books, 2021. ISBN: 9781541672796 (hardcover, \$40.00); 9781541672789 (paperback, \$24.99).

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INTRODUCTION BY WARREN KIMBALL, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY, EMERITUS

Reviewers Mark Edele, Vojin Majstorovic, and Geoffrey Roberts agree that Sean McMeekin contends that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin schemed for, and purposefully tried to foment, a European war between Nazi Germany and the western (capitalist) powers, leaving the USSR (an abbreviation McMeekin seems to avoid in his book) to pick up the pieces. Hence, the Second World War is, according to McMeekin, *Stalin's War*. Nor did that war end in 1945 with (in McMeekin's words) "victory parades and flowers and kisses"; rather, "in Eastern Europe, the war lasted until 1989, in the form of Soviet military occupation" (2). The overarching theme is that the Anglo-Americans failed to seize multiple opportunities to avoid helping the Soviet Union expand its sphere of interest and/or imperial control into all of Eastern Europe, and into Greater East Asia, thus becoming a major geopolitical world power.

Sometimes the devil is in the details. But the details of high policy during the Second World War were not such a devil. The high policies were the essence. Such broad themes should generate lengthy, carefully crafted historical discussions. One such does come with McMeekin's Brobdingnagian mound of evidence about what, as early as 1994, one Russian historian labeled "an enormous flow of Lend-Lease," especially in 1943-45.¹ But explaining *why* that flow took place is largely bypassed by cryptic dismissals of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's and Prime Minister Winston Churchill's foolish naivete. McMeekin writes that "Roosevelt and Churchill missed a genuine chance in 1943 [the Katyn Forest massacre] to redefine the coalition's still nebulous war aims in a more civilized direction" (449). But what about Roosevelt's hardly nebulous unconditional surrender statement, made two months earlier? What about the military practicality of perhaps once again watching Stalin and German Chancellor Adolf Hitler negotiate a peace-pact? What about hopes that the wartime coalition might become a longer-term relationship?

It is not the introducer's task to settle historiographical arguments, nor my assignment (chore?) to dissect cited evidence to determine provenance, relevance, comprehensiveness, and accuracy. Yet too much, though not the essence, of these roundtable essays seems focused on just such quibbling. The reviewers point accurately to the crucial big picture, but do not effectively challenge or support McMeekin's assumptions.

There are straightforward disagreements. Geoff Roberts summarizes and quotes McMeekin arguing that the West should have confronted Stalin during the war and formed "a broad international coalition against totalitarian aggression," an alliance that would have included "pro-Axis Hungary and Fascist Italy" (656). As for Hitler, he could have been dealt with by a peace deal that would have saved Western Europe from Soviet occupation and may even have extracted conquered Poland from his clutches (660). Apparently the assumption is that Hitler would have been overthrown. Roberts concludes that "McMeekin's speculation that standing up to Stalin would have turned out better than standing up to Hitler is as unconvincing as his book's distortion of the complex and contradictory history of the Second World War." But that debate is never joined.

Mark Edele concludes that

"this fast-paced and well-written account argues that the historiography is too obsessed with Hitler, has underestimated the importance of Lend-Lease to the Soviet war effort, and has failed to see that the Soviet dictator was at least as bad as his German colleague. British and US support for the Soviet Union was caused by Roosevelt and Churchill's irrational 'Stalinophilia' (657), not by a realistic assessment of the balance of forces. The Soviets only won because of Western military aid."

¹ David Reynolds, Warren F. Kimball, and A.O. Chubarian, *Allies at War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994): 163-64. Statistics in the book's other essays bore that out.

Vojin Majstorovic's assessment, gently but firmly, supports the other reviewers:

"Stalin's War offers stimulating insights. However, it is an ideological book, sometimes resembling a diatribe more than a scholarly study. There is nothing wrong with anti-Communism per se, but viewing the war through one ideological prism greatly simplifies the complex reality. McMeekin ignores important literature in the field, and makes numerous factual mistakes, many exaggerations, and glaring omissions, which undermine the reader's confidence in the book's conclusions. Any work of this length and range will contain errors, but those in this work all buttress its arguments. Thus, the book is ultimately not persuasive, even if it is interesting to read."

All the reviewers include quick summaries of those grand strategies and high politics, then engage in a war – all too often over footnotes. That could/should have served as the opening of a full debate over those grand strategies and high politics. Likewise McMeekin, who in his response joins the debate over citations. He also briefly summarizes some of those strategies, then criticizes Roosevelt and, to a slightly lesser degree, Churchill as naïve and foolish – a reputation they did not and do not have at home or elsewhere. Stalin is, it seems, brilliant and clever. Were Churchill and Roosevelt mistaken, foolish, naïve to the point of being stupid? Was their gamble that Stalin would cooperate after the war mere self-deception? Was some seventy years without a European-wide war better than what the book seems to advocate (according to the reviewers), that is, a vague Euro-American sphere of influence aimed at containing the Russians? These issues are not properly addressed in the reviews or in the author's response.

Hopefully, another roundtable will discuss those questions, perhaps in the light of how today's Ukraine-Russia war ends up. That discussion could focus on a curious syllogism posed by McMeekin: Was the point of the war to save Western Europe from foreign subjugation, which was easy to do by striking a deal with Hitler; or to save Poland and Eastern Europe from foreign subjugation which, if so, "was an abysmal failure" (660).

One could argue that this roundtable concerns *Stalin's War*, not those high policy negotiations and decisions. But the validity of McMeekin's broad thesis lies in those very high policy discussions and the decisions made by the leaders and governments of the Big Three – Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin. Mostly, the reviewers take a pass, while McMeekin's responses to such matters are brief and alluded to, even mentioned, but largely in passing; never discussed in depth. To offer one example, McMeekin asserts that excessive lend-lease to Russia put the Soviet Union in a position to dominate Eastern Europe after the war. No reviewer really quarrels with that implication.

The reviewers all too often passed each other and the author like ships in the night, a bit too distracted by fascination for the details and perhaps lured by the author's focus; bypassing each other's arguments and much of the book's essence.

Participants:

Sean McMeekin, A.B., Stanford University; M.A., Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley; also studied at University of Paris 7, Moscow State University, Humboldt University, and Mezhdunarodny Universitet, Moscow. Previously taught at Koç University, Istanbul; Bilkent University, Ankara; and Yale University and at Bard College since 2014. He is the author of *Stalin's War: A New History* (Basic Books, 2017); *The Russian Revolution, A New History* (2017); *The Ottoman Endgame. War, Revolution, and the Making of the Modern Middle East, 1908-1923* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), winner of the Arthur Goodzeit Book Prize awarded by the New York Military Affairs Symposium (NYMAS); *July 1914: Countdown to War* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), which was reviewed on the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*; *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Harvard University Press, Reprint 2013) which won the Norman B. Tomlinson Jr. Book Prize and was nominated for the Lionel Gelber Prize; *The Berlin to Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power, 1898–1918* (Harvard University Press/Belknap, 2010), winner of the Barbara Jelavich Book Prize; *History's Greatest Heist: The Looting of Russia by the Bolsheviks* (Yale University, 2008); and *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow's Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West* (Yale University Press, 2004) and numerous articles and book chapters.

Warren F. Kimball, author of *Forged in War* (William Morrow & Co., 1997), *The Juggler* (Princeton University Press, 1991), and books on the Morgenthau Plan and the origins of Lend-Lease, edited the three-volume collection of the Churchill-Roosevelt correspondence (with commentaries, Princeton University Press, 1984). He has published over 50 essays on Churchill, Roosevelt and the era of the Second World War. Robert Treat Professor emeritus at Rutgers University, he was Pitt Professor at the University of Cambridge, 1987-1988, and Mark Clark Distinguished Professor of History at The Citadel, 2002-2004. He chaired the State Department Historical Advisory Committee for nine of his eleven years on the committee and is a former president of SHAFR. His institutional history, *The US Tennis Association: Raising the Game*, was published in December 2017 by the University of Nebraska Press). He was Jones Distinguished Professor at Wofford College (Spartanburg, SC) in spring 2019. He is currently active with various history organizations in promoting significantly improved access to, and much expanded declassification of, US government records held by NARA (National Archives and Records Administration).

Mark Edele is Hansen Professor in History at the University of Melbourne, where he teaches Soviet history, the historiography of Stalinism, and the history of the Second World War. He is the author of *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War* (Oxford University Press 2008), *Stalinist Society* (Oxford University Press, 2011), *Stalin's Defectors* (Oxford University Press, 2017), *The Soviet Union. A Short History* (Wiley Blackwell, 2019), *Debates on Stalinism* (Manchester University Press, 2020), and, with Martin Crotty and Neil Diamant, *The Politics of Veteran Benefits in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative History* (Cornell University Press, 2020). His latest book, *Stalinism at War*, will be published by Bloomsbury in September 2021.

Vojin Majstorovic got his Ph.D. at the University of Toronto in 2017. He is an assistant professor of military history at the University of North Texas, where he teaches courses on World War II and the Holocaust. His manuscript, *Discipline and Violence in the Red Army, 1944-1945*, explores the explosion of what army officials called "military violations:" straggling, deserting, looting, and physically and sexually assaulting civilians in the last year of the war. It examines these issues from the perspectives of the political and military leaderships, the frontline troops, and European civilians. His second research project focuses on the Soviet army's encounter with the Holocaust across East-Central Europe. His research has been published in *Slavic Review*, and *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*.

Geoffrey Roberts is Emeritus Professor of History at UCC and a Member of the Royal Irish Academy. Among his books are *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (2006); *Stalin's General: The Life of Georgy Zhukov* (2013 winner of the Society for Military History's Distinguished Book Award); and (with Martin Folly & Oleg Rzheshesvsky), *Churchill and Stalin: Comrades in Arms during the Second World War* (2019). His latest book is *Stalin's Library: A Dictator and His Books* (2022), published by Yale University Press.

REVIEW BY MARK EDELE, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

“Nothing would be worse,” said U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt in March 1942, “than to have the Russians collapse.”² Better to “lose New Zealand, Australia or anything else.” Why? Because “the Russians are today killing more Germans and destroying more equipment than you and I put together,” as he wrote to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill later that year.³

After some initial Cold War amnesia, historians in the English-speaking world have, by and large, accepted that the war in Europe was won by the Red Army.⁴ Most also agree that, on balance, this was a good outcome. While Stalin’s totalitarianism would victimize millions, it was the lesser evil.⁵ And until the Western allies had developed significant amphibious capability relatively late in the war, there simply was no alternative: only the Soviets could fight Germany on the continent, albeit in a global alliance with the British Empire and the United States.⁶

Recently, however, a new generation of English-language historians have returned to the tune that it was US forces, or the valiant boys of Bomber Command, who won the war. Stalin and his soldiers, at best, were conduits for American military aid (via Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease scheme).⁷

Stalin’s War follows both this trend and McMeekin’s track record of highly controversial histories. In short, this fast-paced and well-written account argues that the historiography is too obsessed with Hitler, has underestimated the importance of Lend-Lease to the Soviet war effort, and has failed to see that the Soviet dictator was at least as bad as his German colleague. British and U.S. support for the Soviet Union was caused by Roosevelt and Churchill’s irrational “Stalinophilia” (657), not by a realistic assessment of the balance of forces. The Soviets only won because of Western military aid.

² A longer version of this review was first published in *Inside Story* (25 May 2021) <https://insidestory.org.au/better-to-lose-australia/>. I would like to thank the editor, Peter Browne, for permission to reuse it here.

³ *The Kremlin Letters: Stalin’s Wartime Correspondence with Churchill and Roosevelt*, ed. David Reynolds, Vladimir Pechatnov, assist. Iskander Magadeyev, Olga Kucherenko (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 94, 96.

⁴ See, for example, the classical treatment by John Erickson, *Stalin’s War with Germany*, 2 vols. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975-1983). Most recently: Wendy Z. Goldman and Donald Filtzer, *Fortress Dark and Stern. The Soviet Home front during World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁵ Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossmann, eds., *Shelter from the Holocaust: rethinking Jewish survival in the Soviet Union* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017).

⁶ Important recent studies on the British and U.S. contributions to Allied victory include James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State. World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); David Edgerton, *Britain’s War Machine. Weapons, Resources, and Experts in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People’s War. The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Evan Mawdsley, *The War for the Seas. A Maritime History of World War II* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁷ For a review essay arguing against this view see Mark Edele, “Who Won the Second World War and Why Should you Care? Reassessing Stalin’s War 75 Years after Victory,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43:6-7 (2019): 1039-1062, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1701443>

Such judgments are based on a caricatured picture of the literature on this war. Neither the authoritative three-volume *Cambridge History of the Second World War*,⁸ nor Evan Mawdsley's masterful short introduction,⁹ for example, apologize for Stalin or concentrate on Hitler. The role of Lend-Lease has been discussed at length, and with significant nuance, including by some of the scholars whom McMeekin quotes.¹⁰ Historians like Robert Gellately have written damning accounts of Stalin's goals in the war and the Cold War,¹¹ none of which are referenced in this book.

If the book treats the work of other historians in a cavalier manner, it employs primary sources tendentiously. To give one example: the speech of Stalin to the graduates of the Red Army military academies on 5 May 1941 that starts the book. Uttered behind closed doors, the leader's words were published in 1998 in a now famous collection.¹² This book is not "out of print today and difficult to find," as McMeekin claims (673), but freely available on the internet. To cite the relevant section of the source in full:

Major-general of the tank forces is speaking. He proposes a toast to the peaceful Stalinist foreign policy.

Comrade Stalin: Allow me a correction. The peaceful policy ensured peace for our country. A peaceful policy is a good thing. For the time being, we pursued a line of defence – until we re-equipped our army, provided our army with modern means of fighting.

And now, when we have reconstructed our army, saturated it with equipment for modern combat, when we have become strong — now we need to move from defence to offense.

In order to defend our country, we are obliged to act in an offensive manner. From defence [we have to] transition to a military policy of offensive actions. We have to rebuild our education, our propaganda, our agitation, our press in an offensive spirit. The Red Army is a modern army, and a modern army is an offensive army.¹³

Historians have puzzled over these words: Did Stalin tell his soldiers that he was planning offensive war? Did Stalin have one drink too many at the reception, and make off-the-cuff remarks he needed to walk back later? Or was this a pep talk to bring the troops into line with military doctrine: that any attack on the Soviet Union would be repulsed aggressively and finished quickly on the opponent's territory? Each interpretation can be made plausible by citing other evidence, but none is provable beyond a reasonable doubt.

⁸ *The Cambridge History of the Second World War. Volume 1: Fighting the War*, ed. John Ferris, Evan Mawdsley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); *The Cambridge History of the Second World War. Volume 2: Politics and Ideology*, ed. Richard Bosworth, Joseph Maiolo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); *The Cambridge History of the Second World War. Volume 3: Total War: Economy, Society and Culture*, ed. Michael Geyer, Adam Tooze (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁹ Evan Mawdsley, *World War II: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: the Nazi-Soviet war, 1941–1945*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

¹¹ Robert Gellately, *Stalin's Curse: Battling for Communism in War and Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² *1941 god: v 2 kn. Kn. 2*, ed. L. E. Reshin, V. P. Naumov et al. (Moscow: Mezhdunar. fond "Demokratiia", 1998).

¹³ Document no. 437, "Vystuplenie General'nogo sekretaria TsK VKP(b) I.V. Stalina pered vypusknikami voennykh akademii RKKA v Kremle," 5 May 1941, *1941-i god. Kniga vtoraiia. Mai 1941 goda [Dok. №№ 426–511]* <https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1011756>

Historians are of course not obliged to tell their readers about every step they took from reading the sources to producing their interpretation. But McMeekin does something else altogether. Here is how he renders Stalin's remarks in his book:

What transpired next was so dramatic, so unexpected, that no one present ever forgot it. ... Stalin leapt to his feet, cut off the poor lieutenant general, and reproached him for pushing an "out of date policy." Stalin then moderated his tone, reassuring the officers and party bosses present that the "Soviet peace policy" ... had indeed bought the Red Army time to modernize and rearm, while also allowing the USSR to "push forward in the west and north, increasing its population by thirteen million in the process." But the days of peaceful absorption of new territory, Stalin stated forthrightly, "had come to an end. Not another foot of ground can be gained with such peaceful sentiments."

The Red Army, Stalin told its future commanders, "must get used to the idea that the era of the peace policy is at an end and that the era of widening the socialist front by force has begun." Anyone "who failed to recognize the necessity of offensive action," Stalin admonished, "was a bourgeois and a fool." The defensive doctrine that had animated strategic planning and war-gaming for a European conflict prior to 1941, he explained, was appropriate only for a weak, unprepared Red Army. (9)

This is not history in the normal sense of the word: a disciplined, if imaginative rendering of the past constrained by what the sources say. The archival account of this speech simply does not have Stalin leap to his feet; he says nothing about an "out of date policy," a thirteen million population increase, or a push to the west and north. No bourgeois fools and widening fronts. Where does McMeekin get this from? I checked the online version of the source, its hard copy version in the collection he cites, and the version in the Stalin archive (for which he gives a wrong file number in his footnote).¹⁴ Nowhere could I find words even close to these.

A close reading of the convoluted endnote to this episode and a trip to my university's library eventually revealed the source: an account by a German diplomat who was not present at the occasion. Published in the 1950s and cited in a notorious German revisionist history (translated into English in 1987), this version relies on interrogations of captured Soviet soldiers later in the war.¹⁵ It has been dismissed by most historians for obvious reasons, but McMeekin claims that it conforms to other eyewitness accounts (675, n. 5). I checked these, too, and found no such words. Instead, they confirm the more boring Soviet archival version.¹⁶

The most telling quotations, then, the words by which McMeekin prosecutes his case against Stalin the alleged warmonger, come from an account far removed from the actual speech and published well before the Soviet archives opened. They have

¹⁴ The correct file number is RGASPI f. 558, op. 1, d. 3808, available from *Stalin Digital Archive*, <https://www.stalindigitalarchive.com/>

¹⁵ Gustav Hilger, *Wir und der Kreml: deutsch-sowjetische Beziehungen 1918–1941. Erinnerungen eines deutschen Diplomaten* (Frankfurt/Main: A. Metzner, 1955; 2nd ed. 1956); Ernst Topitsch, *Stalin's War: A Radical New Theory of the Origins of the Second World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

¹⁶ *Zastol'nye rechi Stalina: dokumenty i materialy*, ed. V. A. Nevezhin (Moscow, Saint-Petersburg: AIRO-XX, Dmitrii Bulanin, 2003), 280–281.

been called “embellishment(s)” by the most in-depth investigation, which McMeekin cites as if it supports his reading (it does not).¹⁷ This calls into question the claim that this book is based on revelations from the Soviet archives. It is not.

The misleading rendering of the 1941 speech is not the only technical concern with the book. McMeekin misquotes a famous Stalin speech of 1931¹⁸ as having taken place in 1928 (with a footnote leading nowhere, p. 25, fn. 2); misdates Stalin’s deportation of the Soviet Korean population (which happened in 1937 in response to the outbreak of war in Asia) to 1938, allegedly some kind of perverse victory celebration after the Battle of Lake Khasan (66); claims that Britain was “grasping for legal straws to avoid entanglement with Stalin” (111) by interpreting the phrase “European power” in the 25 August 1939 Agreement of Mutual Assistance with Poland to mean Germany only (in fact this was explicitly stated in a secret protocol to the agreement)¹⁹; asserts that the April 1941 neutrality pact with Japan allowed Stalin “to concentrate everything he had on the West” (264), stripping “his Far Eastern defenses” (377) (in fact, Soviet troop strength in the east never fell below 1.1 million men, with significant military assets deployed throughout the war)²⁰; etc. etc. His account of the role of U.S. and British aid, which is central to his argument, is a polemic that unfortunately obscures the real constellation of forces²¹ and is not infrequently undermined by his own evidence.

Most egregiously, McMeekin cites a 1939 forgery of an alleged Stalin speech as authentic, claiming that it was recently “discovered in the Russian archives” (83). There is, indeed, a copy — in an archive holding *foreign-origin* documents²² — and it is a translation from a *French* original.²³ Even the article McMeekin cites for proof of the authenticity of this document notes that “it seems to originate from an article published in the French *La Revue universelle*” in 1944.²⁴ As the most accomplished political historian of Stalinism wrote in a work McMeekin cites in the book: “Most historians have never assigned much significance to this forgery. Neither the Politburo archive nor Stalin’s own files contain even circumstantial evidence of such a speech.”²⁵

¹⁷ Jürgen Förster, Evan Mawdsley, “Hitler and Stalin in Perspective: Secret Speeches on the Eve of Barbarossa,” *War in History* 11:1 (January 2004): 61-103.

¹⁸ J. V. Stalin, “The Tasks of Business Executives. Speech Delivered at the First All-Union Conference of Leading Personnel of Socialist Industry,” 4 February 1931, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1931/02/04.htm>

¹⁹ “Agreement of Mutual Assistance between the United Kingdom and Poland – London (1939),” [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Agreement_of_Mutual_Assistance_between_the_United_Kingdom_and_Poland-London_\(1939\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Agreement_of_Mutual_Assistance_between_the_United_Kingdom_and_Poland-London_(1939))

²⁰ Mark Edede, *Stalinism at War. The Soviet Union in World War II* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 106-7.

²¹ H. G. W. Davie, “Logistics of the Combined-Arms Army — Motor Transport,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31:4 (2018): 474–501. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2018.1521360>

²² “Kharakteristika fondov,” *Russian State Military Archive (RGVA)*, <http://rgvarchive.ru/ob-arkhive/kharakteristika-fondov.shtml>

²³ T. Bushueva, “...proklinaia — poprobuite poniat’...,” *Novyi mir*, no. 12 (1994), https://magazines.gorky.media/novyi_mi/1994/12/proklinaya-poprobujite-ponyat.html

²⁴ Carl O. Nordling, “Did Stalin deliver His Alleged Speech of 19 August 1939?” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 19:1 (2006): 93.

²⁵ Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, transl. Nora Seligman Favorov (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 168.

Such examples undermine confidence in *Stalin's War* as a piece of history writing. It makes a lot of arguable points: that Stalin always had one eye on his own Eastern Front, the front with Japan; that he was a Marxist who saw little difference between an English Tory and a German Nazi; that his foreign policy was cynical to an extreme degree, exploiting the Soviet Union's allies as much as he could; that in the run-up to the notorious Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement of August 1939 he was far from a passive figure, actively shopping around for the best deal he could get for his country; that the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939 was more than just a bloodless sideshow; that the Sovietisation of the newly acquired "western borderlands" in 1939-41 and then again from 1944 was an incredibly violent affair; that Britain and France could have stopped both the German war machine and Stalin's expansion into eastern Europe had they bombed the Baku oilfields in 1940; that the April 1941 neutrality pact with Japan was a major 'coup' with serious strategic consequences; that the Soviets were busily preparing for war with Germany in 1941; that Roosevelt was naive in his dealings with Stalin; and that both the U.S. President and the British Prime Minister adopted "an attitude of wilful blindness toward Stalin's crimes" (448). He is right, too, in pointing out that many aspects of Stalin's war make it impossible to tell the story of the Second World War as a simple fight of good against evil. But in working to completely discredit the Soviet (read: Russian) war effort the book dispenses with the critical method that historical research demands.

REVIEW BY VOJIN MAJSTOROVIC, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

Sean McMeekin's *Stalin's War: A New History of World War II* is ambitious, well-written, and contains interesting insights, but it is also rigidly anti-Communist, and ultimately, unconvincing. The thesis is that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was the driving force behind World War II. In McMeekin's view, the Soviet Union was a much more malignant force in the conflict than we appreciate today. The West repeatedly made the mistake of not confronting the Soviet Union more forcefully before Operation Barbarossa, and of assisting it too much after. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and even Prime Minister Winston Churchill to an extent, were taken in by Stalin. The unconditional Western aid to Moscow made the survival of the Soviet Union possible and played an important role in Communist expansionism beyond Soviet borders.

The book has numerous strengths. McMeekin connects Stalin's policies in the Far East and Europe in a way that is refreshing since many historians neglect the Asian factor in Stalin's European calculations. There are many interesting details in the book, some of which are based on the author's original research in Soviet archives. For example, chapter 10 details the Soviet-Romanian competition and border violations in the Danube Delta region that led to the deaths of numerous civilians and foreign nationals being taken prisoner. His exploration of how economic considerations in the Soviet Union shaped operations in the 1941 campaign is interesting. The discussions of the meetings between Soviet, American, and British leaders are very interesting, and McMeekin successfully demonstrates how the Soviet dictator frequently outfoxed Churchill and Roosevelt.

When it comes to large strategic questions, McMeekin believes that the Americans and the British could have defeated Nazi Germany on their own. Thus, positive aspects of the Soviet role in the war, such as doing more than others to smash the Nazi war machine or liberating the death camps, do not seem important because the West would have done it without the Red Army. In turn, many of the negative consequences resulting from the Red Army's victory, according to him, such as Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe and Asia, could have been avoided had the victory been achieved without the Soviets.

McMeekin's arguments that the British and the Americans alone would have managed to defeat Germany in a timely manner are not persuasive to me. For example, he forcefully argues that the Americans and the British should have replaced western Europe with southern Europe as the site of the second front so that they could have advanced north and cut off the Soviet penetration into eastern Europe (656). This ignores the logistical challenges of supplying an army in southern Europe from the Allied bases in England. McMeekin does not say how the Allies would have maintained a large front in Italy and the Balkans, which had woefully inadequate roads and railroads, and does not offer a solution to the problem of how the Allies would have been able to break through the Alps and Dinaric Alps, formidable natural barriers to reaching central Europe from the south. Indeed, the Allies did pursue the southern route, landing in Italy in the summer of 1943. The advance through the Italian peninsula, however, was painfully slow.

McMeekin seems ambivalent on the issue of whether Soviet or German victory was preferable in the war. *Stalin's War* made me probe deeper into my thinking on these bigger questions about the war. The Soviet Union lost 26.6 million people during the war, with the most credible estimates for military losses ranging between 11.4 and 14.6 million.²⁶ Considering the genocidal Nazi plans for the remaking of the European part of the Soviet Union, and the steps they took to implement this vision, what was at stake in the war was the physical survival of all the Soviet Jews, the majority of the European population of the Soviet Union, and the Soviet state, which was to be replaced by a series of Nazi fiefdoms such as the

²⁶ For 26,6 million, see G. F. Krivosheev, *Rossia i SSSR v voynakh XX veka: Poteri vooruzhennykh sil: staticheskoe issledovanie* (Moscow: OLMA-Press, 2001), 227. For 11.4 million see Krivosheev, *Rossia i SSSR v voynakh XX veka*, 250. For 14,6 million see Lev Lopukhovskiy, Boris Kavalerchik, Harold Orenstein, and David Glantz, *The Price of Victory: The Red Army's Casualties in the Great Patriotic War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military 2017), 94.

Reichskommissariat Ukraine.²⁷ McMeekin is of course correct in arguing that the Stalinist regime was brutal, executing hundreds of thousands of its citizens, and imprisoning and starving millions. However, the Red Army's occupation of Eastern Europe did not result in the physical elimination of entire nations; the German victory would have.

To be fair, McMeekin acknowledges the genocidal aspect of the Nazi war in the East, but that aspect is downplayed. The book appears to place less responsibility on the Germans for the mass murder of 3.3 million Soviet prisoners of war than on Stalin and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov for failing to sign the Geneva and Hague conventions (314-321).²⁸ The author goes on at length about the Soviet cruelty to their own and German prisoners of war (314-321), but does not mention Mark Edede's 2016 article which concludes that Soviet-perpetrated war crimes were more similar to prisoner executions in other wars than to the Germans' premeditated war of extermination.²⁹

McMeekin takes seriously the idea that the West should have declared war on the Soviet Union when it attacked Finland (122), writes positively about Western politicians who wanted to stay neutral in the Soviet-German War, and suggests that the Lend-Lease should have ended after the battle of Kursk to slow down the Red Army's westward advance (658-659). He also argues that Churchill and Roosevelt should have forced Stalin into war against Japan (372), and that they should have refused to agree to the Germany-first course, which supposedly only helped the Soviet Union (658). If Washington or London pursued these policies, at a minimum, it would have prolonged the conflict in Europe. Since the book engages in so many counterfactuals, one can ask what the delay in the Third Reich defeat would have meant? Certainly, many more Jews would have been murdered. In particular, the Red Army's timely penetration into Central Europe in the winter of 1944-1945 ended the slaughter of Hungarian Jews. A slower westward advance by the Red Army would have meant longer German exploitation and occupation of Eastern Europe, and millions of more dead Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Poles, Serbs, Greeks, and others. Millions of Axis and Soviet soldiers would have died had the war dragged on longer. There is irony in that while the book is devoted to the war's victims, it argues for policies that would have prolonged the war.

One of the book's central claims is that the Soviet-German Pact of 1939 represented the fulfillment of Stalin's ultimate foreign policy aims: it unleashed Nazi Germany against the Western democracies and Poland while fulfilling the Kremlin's long-term goal of westward expansion into former Czarist territories. Moscow's pursuit of collective security with London and Paris, as well as its popular-front tactics that encouraged cooperation between communists and non-communists, were a ruse. McMeekin does not discuss the fact that the French and British betrayal of Czechoslovakia at Munich marginalized Moscow, greatly contributing to its decision to negotiate with Adolf Hitler a year later. As the Germans threatened Central Europe's sole democracy, Moscow promised Prague help and warned the Germans of their treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia.³⁰ McMeekin rightfully notes that the Red Army was weakened by the purges, but he ignores the fact that it mobilized thirty infantry and ten cavalry divisions, seven tank and motorized infantry brigades, twelve brigades of fighter

²⁷ For the Nazi plans to starve thirty million Soviet citizens, destroy the Soviet state west of Urals, turn the country into a colony, and populate it with ethnic Germans, see Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel, *1941: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012).

²⁸ Christian Streit, the authority on the subject of the Soviet prisoners of war (not cited by McMeekin), wrote: "Except for the Jews, Soviet prisoners of war suffered the worst fate of all the victims of National Socialist Germany. Between 22 June 1941 and the end of the war, roughly 5.7 million members of the Red Army fell into German hands...3,300,000 (57.5 percent of the total) had perished," Christian Streit, "Soviet Prisoners of War in the Hands of the Wehrmacht," in *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941-1944*, eds. Hannes Heer and Klaus Namann (New York: Berhahn Books, 1995), 80.

²⁹ Mark Edede, "Take (No) Prisoners! The Red Army and German POWs, 1941-1943," *The Journal of Modern History* 88:2 (2016): 347-348.

³⁰ Hugh Ragsdale, *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis, and the Coming of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 111, 129.

planes, and bombers (59).³¹ These facts, left out of the discussion by McMeekin, reveal that Moscow was interested in collective security as the best way to counter the Nazi threat.

I disagree with McMeekin's main interpretations, but there are also serious questions about his methodology. McMeekin claims that the U.S. sent \$11 billion to the Soviet Union. However, he adds that \$11 billion is the equivalent of "well over \$1 trillion today," without offering any evidence for this claim (658). The U.S. embassy in Moscow states that the American aid of \$11.3 billion is equivalent to \$180 billion in today's dollars.³² Albert Weeks maintained that the Lend-Lease aid was \$12 billion, or around \$80 billion in 2004.³³ The lack of clarity is glaring because it is central to the argument that the Red Army would have not defeated the Germans without supplies and aid from the West.

The U.S. sent large quantities of food to the Soviet Union, a fact which McMeekin discusses at length (522-527). His argument is, essentially, that the hard-working Americans fed Stalin and the Red Army, asking the reader to feel sorry for the Americans who had to ration during the war (524). He does not, however, mention any of the recent studies that illuminate the issue of hunger in the wartime Soviet Union. The book also ignores that fact that there was a massive famine in the wartime Soviet Union, which, according to one estimate, took the lives of 1.5 million Soviet civilians, excluding up to 800,000 people who starved to death in besieged Leningrad.³⁴ Although the Red Army also went hungry, especially in 1941 and early 1942, the Stalinist regime prioritized feeding its military machine over civilians.³⁵ Soviet troops began to eat much better in 1943, after it went on the offensive, but the civilians continued to starve, with cases of cannibalism proliferating in central Russia in the winter of 1943-1944.³⁶ As late as 1944, malnutrition was the leading cause of death of non-child civilians.³⁷ McMeekin fails to mention the groundbreaking study about food in wartime Soviet Union, *Hunger and War: Food Provision in the Soviet Union during World War II*, even though it could support his arguments.³⁸ This oversight, along with the absence of the other studies cited in this paragraph, point to the historiographical weakness of the book.

³¹ For the mobilization of sizable Soviet forces, see Ragsdale, *The Soviets*, 113-115.

³² No name, "World War II Allies: U.S. Lend-Lease to the Soviet Union, 1941-1945," U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Russia, 10 May 2020, <https://ru.usembassy.gov/world-war-ii-allies-u-s-lend-lease-to-the-soviet-union-1941-1945/>, accessed 15 September 2021.

³³ Albert L. Weeks, *Russia's Life Saver: Lend-Lease Aid to the U.S.S.R. in World War II* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 25.

³⁴ For the famine in Soviet interior, see Karel Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda during World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 97. For Leningrad, see Alexis Peri, *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 4.

³⁵ For hunger in the Red Army see Brandon M. Schechter, *The Stuff of Soldiers: A History of the Red Army in World War II through Objects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 87. For prioritization of feeding the Red Army, see Wendy Z. Goldman, "Introduction: The Politics of Food and War," in Wendy Z. Goldman and Donald Filtzer, eds., *Hunger and War: Food Provisioning in the Soviet Union during World War II* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), 12.

³⁶ For improvements in the diet of Soviet troops, see Schechter, *The Stuff of Soldiers*, 89-90. For cannibalism, see Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, 97.

³⁷ Donald Filtzer, "Starvation Mortality in Soviet Home-Front Industrial Regions during World War II," in Goldman and Filtzer, eds. *Hunger and War*, 266.

³⁸ Filtzer found that the Lend-Lease Food Aid from the US, Great Britain, and Canada supplied 760 calories per Soviet soldier in the first year of the war, 1,162 calories per Soviet soldier in the second year of the war, 2,014 calories during the third year, and 1,622 during the war's final year, *Ibid.*, 335. This was indeed massive aid that could have proven crucial to the Soviet war effort.

McMeekin's argument is often marked by embellishment. For example, in the discussion of the Anglo-French attempts to draw Turkey into war against the Soviet Union during the Kremlin's aggression against Finland in 1939-1940, he discusses the role of agent fifty-nine. McMeekin states that this agent was almost certainly Michael Kedia, a former Georgian Menshevik and a Soviet spy, who was well known personally to Stalin and to the Soviet secret police chief Lavrentii Beria since childhood, and who had penetrated the Allied military establishment in Syria (143-144). McMeekin's source, however, does not mention that Kedia knew Stalin and Beria since childhood.³⁹ While the story that makes the Soviet dictator, his murderous and sadistic police chief, and the sly spy were childhood friends makes for compelling reading, there is no evidence for it.

McMeekin also claims that nine-tenths of Great Terror victims were national minorities, predominantly Ukrainians and Poles (61). Although Poles, a relatively small minority in the multinational Soviet Union, suffered disproportionately in the Great Terror, the vast majority of the victims were ethnic Russians.⁴⁰ He states that the Soviet Union "played no role" in the war against Italy (498). Italy, however, sent a large number of troops to fight the Red Army, suffering 150,000 casualties on the Eastern Front.⁴¹ In lamenting that the war ended with Soviet victory in the East, he inaccurately claims that millions of Soviet POWs were sent to prisons, forced labor, or summary punishments (672). Out of some 1.5 million prisoners of war that the Red Army liberated and processed by 1 March 1946, almost 43% were reenlisted into the military, 18% were returned to their homes, 15% had been transferred to NKVD for further investigation (it is unclear how many were released or punished), and 22% were sent to labor battalions.⁴²

The book contains frequent problematic claims that are not buttressed by explanations or evidence. McMeekin refers to Spain, Italy, and Hungary as part of the 'civilized' world when they wanted to confront the Soviet Union during the Soviet aggression against Finland in 1939-1940 (130 and 150). In reality, at this time General Franco had just completed the brutal conquest of democratic Spain, Italy had already invaded Abyssinia and Albania, and Hungary had participated in the partition of Czechoslovakia, while France and Britain held large parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia in brutal subjugation. He correctly condemns the Soviet aggression against the Finns. Yet, when Soviet opponents behaved in comparable ways, McMeekin describes them as part of the 'civilized world.' Also, although Germany did depend on Soviet resources between 1939 and 1941, it did not become a "vassal of the Soviet Union," as he argues (178). McMeekin claims that Stalin's hatred of Poles was similar to Hitler's antisemitism as it was "born of a grudging respect for their strength as a people – a people whom he genuinely feared," but he does not corroborate these extreme claims (147). He describes the Battle of Moscow as Soviet General Georgi Zhukov's "suicidal last stand" (341). But the battle was hardly suicidal. The Red Army successfully beat back the Germans, nor was it the last stand, since the Soviet forces would have continued the fight had Moscow fallen.

Stalin's War offers stimulating insights. However, it is an ideological book, sometimes resembling a diatribe more than a scholarly study. There is nothing wrong with anti-Communism per se, but viewing the war through one ideological prism greatly simplifies the complex reality. McMeekin ignores important literature in the field, and makes numerous factual

³⁹ Jeffrey Burds, "The Soviet War Against 'Fifth Columnists': The Case of Chechnya, 1942-1944," *Journal of Contemporary History* 47:4 (2007): 267-314.

⁴⁰ In the Great Terror of 1937-1938, the secret police arrested 657,799 ethnic Russians, 189,410 ethnic Ukrainians, 105,485 Poles, 75,331 Germans, and 30,000 Jews, Lynne Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial: Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24.

⁴¹ For Italian casualties, see Maria Teresa Giusti, *Stalin's Italian Prisoners of War* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2020), 274.

⁴² V. N. Zemskov, *Vozvrashchenie sovetskikh peremeshchennykh lits v SSSR 1944-1952 gg* (Moscow: Institut Rossiiskoi istorii Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, 2016), 127.

mistakes, many exaggerations, and glaring omissions, which undermine the reader's confidence in the book's conclusions. Any work of this length and range will contain errors, but those in this work all buttress its arguments. Thus, the book is ultimately not persuasive, even if it is interesting to read.

 REVIEW BY GEOFFREY ROBERTS, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK, EMERITUS

Sean McMeekin's contention in *Stalin's War* that the Second World War was caused more by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin than German dictator Adolf Hitler, has a long and dubious pedigree: the war-revolution conspiracy theory of the interwar years. According to this legend, Stalin plotted to precipitate a new world war that would lead to a global Communist revolution.

McMeekin argues that Stalin goaded the Japanese to invade Manchuria in 1931 and then China in 1937 (62-63). The Soviet campaign for collective security against fascist aggression was a sham, he argues, as was Moscow's support for Republican Spain during its civil war (56-60). In 1939 Stalin engineered an Anglo-French-German war over Poland (83-84, 94-95). Allied to Hitler, he then over-played his hand by refusing to deepen his pact with the Nazi dictator (290-291). That disastrous miscalculation led to the Soviet Union's near defeat in 1941, but Stalin's bacon was saved by western military aid, which, says McMeekin, was the crucial source of all his subsequent victories over Hitler's legions (chaps 21-24).

In reality, Stalin was far from relishing the prospect of a new imperialist world war. The First World War had been the handmaiden of the Russian Revolution but it was followed by civil war and foreign military intervention that came close to strangling Bolshevism at birth. And Stalin was never among those who believed that the revolution could and should be exported abroad by force of arms. His priority was safeguarding the revolution at home and protecting the new Soviet state. He feared the re-emergence of an anti-Communist coalition that would attempt to resolve capitalism's own problems and contradictions at the Soviet expense. He warned the imperialists that should they attack the Soviet Union again it would be their own downfall since the international working class would rise in support of the USSR.⁴³ But the idea that Stalin would test such rhetoric by deliberately provoking war himself is unsustainable, not least because he had little faith in the short-term prospects for world revolution.⁴⁴

A post-Soviet documentary discovery that could have been cited in support of the war-revolution hypothesis is the text of an unpublished speech of Stalin's dating from April 1927. In that speech to Moscow party activists, Stalin said the Bolsheviks had only been able to seize power in 1917 because the imperialists were split into two warring camps. However, the speech was about current upheavals in China and Stalin's point was that the Chinese communists needed to be cautious and take things slowly because the international situation in 1927 was different from that in 1917.⁴⁵

As a diligent student of history and diplomacy, Stalin knew well that war and inter-imperialist disharmony presented opportunities as well as dangers. In September 1935, for example, he reacted strongly against a suggestion from his Foreign Commissariat that Soviet exports to Italy should be banned because of the growing Italo-Abyssinian crisis, which culminated with Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia a month later:

“The conflict is not only between Italy and Abyssinia, but also between Italy and France on one side, and England on the other. The old entente is no more. Instead, two ententes have emerged: the entente of Italy and France, on one side, and the entente of England and Germany, on the other. The more intense the tussle between them, the better for the USSR. We can sell bread to

⁴³ For a classic study of this theme: F.S. Burin, ‘The Communist Doctrine of the Inevitability of War’, *American Political Science Review* 57:2 (June 1963).

⁴⁴ On Stalin's foreign policy, see Alfred J. Rieber. *Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). On Stalin and world revolution: E. van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth-Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁴⁵ RGASPI, F.558 Op.11, D.1110, doc.7. The existence of this document was brought to my attention by Jonathan Haslam, *The Spectre of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 329.

both so that they can fight. We don't profit if one of them beats the other just now. We benefit if the fight is lengthier, without a quick victory for one or the other.⁴⁶

But taking advantage of conflict situations as and when they arose is quite different from plotting to precipitate them. Indeed, according to Stalin, it was not the Soviets who were fanning the flames of a new world war but the British and French appeasers of the aggressor states. In March 1939 he told the 18th Party Congress:

“The policy of non-intervention means conniving at aggression, giving free rein to war . . . The policy of non-intervention reveals an eagerness, a desire, not to hinder the aggressors in their nefarious work: not to hinder Japan, say, from embroiling herself in a war with China, or, better still, the Soviet Union; not to hinder Germany, say, from . . . embroiling herself in a war with the Soviet Union; to allow all the belligerents to sink deeply into the mire of war...to weaken and exhaust one another; and then, when they have become weak enough, to appear on the scene with fresh strength, to appear, of course, ‘in the interests of peace’, and to dictate conditions to the enfeebled belligerents. Cheap and Easy!”⁴⁷

Stalin concluded this section of his speech with the much-quoted warning that the Soviet Union would not be “drawn into conflicts by warmongers who are accustomed to have others pull their chestnuts out of the fire for them.” A literal translation of the Russian phrase used by Stalin better captures his meaning: “to rake the fire with somebody else’s hands” (*zagrebat’ zhar chuzhimi rukami*). In other words, the Soviet Union was not going to be dragged into doing the western states’ fighting for them.

McMeekin argues that Stalin took a leaf out of the appeasers’ playbook and signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler that manoeuvred Britain and France into a war with Nazi Germany over Poland from which the Soviet Union would benefit, ultimately by world revolution.

To buttress his case, McMeekin cites a speech that Stalin supposedly made in August 1939 in which he spoke of the Sovietisation of Europe as a result of a war he intended to provoke. The document in question first appeared in the French press shortly after the outbreak of war. It was plainly a piece of black propaganda designed to discredit Stalin at a time when he was cosying up to Hitler.

McMeekin accepts that the speech’s transcript is controversial and notes that nearly all historians consider it to be fake, but argues that its contents are “consistent with Stalin’s pronouncements on Soviet foreign policy going back to 1925, and subsequently” (84). This is an unsubstantiated claim that has been made many times before by war-revolution conspiracy theorists, but McMeekin offers nothing new in terms of evidence.⁴⁸

The closest he comes to proving the war-revolution hypothesis is his citation of Stalin’s well-known conversation with Comintern leader Georgy Dimitrov on 7 September 1939, not long after the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet pact and the outbreak of World War II.

“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 in their having a good hard fight and weakening

⁴⁶ *Stalin i Kaganovich: Perepiska, 1931–1936 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2001) doc. 621. Stalin’s remark about Anglo-German entente was prompted by the recent naval agreement between the two states.

⁴⁷ Joseph Stalin, *Leninism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1942) 626.

⁴⁸ On the fake document issue see further Mark Edele’s review of the McMeekin book: <https://insidestory.org.au/better-to-lose-australia/>

each other. It would be fine if at the hands of Germany the position of the richest capitalist countries (especially England) were shaken. Hitler, without understanding or desiring it, is shaking and undermining the capitalist system...We can manoeuvre, pit one side against the other to set them fighting with each other as fiercely as possible. The non-aggression pact is to a certain degree helping Germany. Next time we'll urge on the other side."⁴⁹

McMeekin does not include Stalin's statement at the same meeting, when he told Dimitrov: "we preferred agreements with the so-called democratic countries and therefore conducted negotiations. But the English and French wanted us for farmhands and at no cost."⁵⁰

Stalin was referring here to the failed triple alliance negotiations with Britain and France, which broke down in August 1939 when London and Paris could not deliver advance Polish consent to Red Army's right of passage across Poland in the event of war with Germany. Having failed to form the anti-Hitler coalition they had been striving for since 1933, Stalin and the Soviets opted for neutrality and a Nazi-Soviet pact that would keep the USSR out of the imminent war and enable them to protect the USSR's security and pursue its interests as they saw fit.

While Stalin did believe in the revolution and was committed to promoting it as and when he could, a much higher priority was defending Soviet state interests. In the long run of history, nothing was deemed more important to the cause of revolution than preserving the Soviet socialist system.

The main point of Stalin's conversation with Dimitrov was to rationalise Soviet participation in the destruction of independent Poland:

"Formerly . . . the Polish state was a national state. Therefore, revolutionaries defended it against partition and enslavement. Now [Poland] is a fascist state, oppressing the Ukrainians, Belorussians and so forth. The annihilation of that state under current conditions would mean one fewer bourgeois fascist state to contend with! What would be the harm if as a result of the rout of Poland we were to extend the socialist system onto new territories and populations?"⁵¹

Significantly, Stalin did not advocate turning the new imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war, as Vladimir Lenin had done during the First World War. Indeed, in subsequent conversations with Dimitrov, he, in effect, repudiated that slogan and doctrine. On 25 October 1939 he observed that "during the first imperialist war the Bolsheviks overestimated the situation. We all got ahead of ourselves and made mistakes . . . there must be no copying now of the positions the Bolsheviks held then . . . It should also be remembered that the current situation is different: at that time there were no Communists in power. Now there is the Soviet Union!" On 7 November Stalin told Dimitrov: "I believe that the slogan of turning the imperialist war into a civil war (during the first imperialist war) was appropriate only for

Russia . . . For the European countries that slogan was inappropriate . . ."⁵²

The usual extension to the war-revolution hypothesis is that Stalin was actively preparing to attack Germany in summer of 1941 in order to unleash a revolutionary situation in Europe. Key to this contention is a draft revision to the Soviet war plan

⁴⁹ Ivo Banac, ed., *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 115. My quotation is fuller than the one provided in McMeekin's book (94).

⁵⁰ Banac, ed., *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, 116.

⁵¹ Banac, ed., *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, 116.

⁵² Banac, ed., *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov* 119, 121.

dated 15 May 1941, which envisaged a pre-emptive strike by the Red Army on the eve of an anticipated German invasion of the USSR.

As McMeekin quite rightly notes, “neither the Soviet war plan of May 15 nor the subsequent orders shifting Soviet armies to the western frontier in May and June 1941 proves that Stalin had already resolved on war, whether pre-emptive, defensive, or otherwise” (278). Pointing to massive Soviet preparations for war, he dismisses as “absurd” any “lingering notion” that “Stalin and his generals were asleep at the wheel as Hitler’s generals prepared for Barbarossa” (279). McMeekin is equally dismissive of the ‘myth’ that Stalin broke down emotionally following the German attack on 22 June 1941 – a story that he sees as “fitting perfectly with the Soviet pose of innocent victimhood” (289).

The book is based on a seemingly impressive array of sources, including American, Bulgarian, French, German, Polish and Russian archives. From these sources McMeekin has gleaned some new and interesting information about topics such as allied supplies to Russia, the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944, the Soviet plunder of Germany in 1945, and the war with Japan. But for the most part behind this research base lie multiple errors, misrepresentations, half-truths and distortions. The rules of historical evidence do not get in the way of this ideologically driven story of Soviet perfidy.

As historian E.H. Carr remarked, quoting the poet and classicist, A.E. Houseman, “accuracy is a duty not a virtue,” but when it comes to evidentiary mistakes, *Stalin’s War* has an embarrassment of riches, as a few representative examples will show.

On page 57 McMeekin states: “As Stalin privately told his military intelligence [in May 1937 – GR], “there are immediate enemies and potential enemies,” and the Czechs were, at the time, “the enemy of our enemies, nothing more.” The source is volume two of Stephen Kotkin’s biography of Stalin, which reveals that the quotation omits what Stalin wrote (in a memo) immediately before the above cited words: “*from the point of view of intelligence, we cannot have friends; there are immediate enemies etc*” (emphasis added). As Kotkin explains, Stalin was concerned that Soviet intelligence had been penetrated by the Germans, his message being that his officials should trust no one.⁵³

McMeekin states several times that General Philip Faymonville, who served as U.S. military attaché and lend-lease administrator, was an “NKVD asset” and that “the Venona decrypts declassified and published in the 1990s confirmed the suspicions of army intelligence that Faymonville was reporting regularly to the NKVD” (358, 361, 369-70, 486, 538).

McMeekin does not cite any source for these contentions, nor the Venona documentation. The probable source may be *The Venona Secrets* by Herbert Romerstein and Eric Breindel, which is listed in the bibliography. According to these two authors, Faymonville ended up working for the Soviets because he was a homosexual who was ‘honey-trapped’ by a lover who was an NKVD agent. Their cited source for this story is chapter 9 of a 1970s in-house official history of Soviet intelligence, whose lead author, V.N. Chebrikov, became chief of the KGB in the 1980s.⁵⁴

As far as I know, this history has yet to be translated into English but the Russian original is available online. Chapter 9 deals with intelligence activities during the Second World War, including in relation to western allied intelligence operatives and agencies. According to the KGB history, *Faymonville was an American intelligence asset*, and an NKVD agent called ‘Electric’ was tasked with getting close to the General with a view to finding out what he knew and to feed him disinformation.⁵⁵

⁵³ Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1928-1941* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), 413-414.

⁵⁴ Herbert Romerstein and Eric Breindel, *The Venona Secrets* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery), chap 6, section on Harry Hopkins.

⁵⁵ Viktor Chebrikov et al, *Istoriya Sovetskikh Organov Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti* (Moscow, 1977), 410.
<https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~hpcws/istoria9.pdf>

In the wilderness of mirrors that is the intelligence world anything is possible, and one could imagine that this a cover story to disguise the fact that Faymonville was indeed a Soviet agent, but disbelief is the prudent response to any such claims in the absence of documentary evidence. Certainly, Faymonville was highly sympathetic to the Soviets and their war effort, but that does not mean that he or similarly minded individuals were Soviet spies, as opposed to patriots who thought that allying wholeheartedly with Russia during the war best served their own country's interests.⁵⁶

During the war the Stalin cult spread through the allied world. He was *Time* Man of the Year for 1942 and throughout the war was inundated with questions and requests for interviews from foreign journalists. In January 1943 New York publishers Simon & Schuster wrote to Stalin suggesting that he write them a book about Soviet war and peace aims.⁵⁷ McMeekin cites this source but mischaracterises the Simon & Schuster 'pitch' as one for a Stalin "autobiography" (455). In neither the original English-language letter nor in the Russian translation prepared by Stalin's staff is there even the slightest hint that Simon & Schuster were suggesting an autobiography.

While I am pleased to have had this interesting archival source brought to my attention, McMeekin's error is one of many such factual inaccuracies in the book.

The most bizarre claim is that in spring 1943 Stalin approached Hitler with the offer of an armistice (453). But why do such a thing after the resounding Soviet victory at Stalingrad in January 1943? Why would Stalin risk alienating his British and American allies when, as McMeekin is at pains to point out, they were supplying him with massive material aid? During the war there were numerous fake news stories about peace feelers, many of them generated by intelligence agencies. The Soviets played this game, too, but despite decades of digging by historians, there is still no hard evidence of any serious intent on the part of either Stalin, Roosevelt, or Churchill to negotiate a separate peace with Hitler.⁵⁸

The book is extremely anti-Communist, and focuses on the dark side of Soviet behaviour during the war – the Katyn massacre of Polish POWs, the deportation of ethnic groups who were accused of collective disloyalty, and Stalin's maltreatment of the families of Soviet POWs, including that of his son, Yakov, who died in German captivity in 1943. This is fair enough. While Stalin and the Red Army did, arguably, save the world from Hitler and the Nazis, the cost was brutal.

In his conclusion McMeekin argues that the West should have confronted Stalin during the war and formed "a broad international coalition against totalitarian aggression," an alliance that would have included "pro-Axis Hungary and Fascist Italy" (656). As to Hitler, he could have been dealt with by a peace deal that would have saved Western Europe from Nazi occupation and may even have extracted conquered Poland from his clutches (660). McMeekin's speculation that standing up to Stalin would have turned out better than standing up to Hitler is as unconvincing as his book's distortion of the complex and contradictory history of the Second World War.

⁵⁶ On Faymonville: Mary E. Glantz, *FDR and the Soviet Union* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas 2005) passim.

⁵⁷ RGASP, F.558, Op.11, D.221, doc.19.

⁵⁸ McMeekin's source is a 1979 translation of a book about the Abwehr chief, Admiral Canaris, by the German journalist, Heinz Höhne.

 RESPONSE BY SEAN MCMEEKIN, BARD COLLEGE

I am grateful to H-Diplo for organizing this forum, which allows me to respond to several pointed critiques of my book *Stalin's War*. I would also like to thank Warren Kimball for writing the introduction. I will begin with Mark Edele's review, which is an updated and more heavily researched version of the one he first published in May 2021.

It is not a careful review. Edele's critique of alleged errors often rests on an absurdly literal-minded reading of the text, viz., that I claim that Stalin deported all 200,000-odd Koreans on a single day in 1938, rather than against the backdrop of a Far Eastern War – something of course I do not say, and that cannot be inferred from my argument. Edele tries to refute my 'claim' that the British Cabinet was "grasping for legal straws to avoid entanglement with Stalin" by pointing out that there was a secret wiggle-out clause in the 25 August 1939 Mutual Assistance Pact with Poland. There was a secret clause – but the War Cabinet had not been informed, which is why Foreign Secretary Viscount Halifax gave the Cabinet the "odd legal briefing" I describe on page 111 of *Stalin's War*. Here my book cites British War Cabinet minutes, accurately rendering a critical discussion word for word as it happened, along with a letter from France's Ambassador to the French Foreign Minister from the Quai d'Orsay archives.⁵⁹ Edele cites Wikipedia.

Edele claims to have tried to track down my references, only for them to lead "nowhere," for example "footnote" no. 2 on page 25 of *Stalin's War*. There is no footnote on page 25. The *endnote* Edele refers to, which is found on page 676 of *Stalin's War*, leads not "nowhere" but to Robert Tucker's book *Stalin in Power*, where the citation is found and properly located in my endnote. To be certain, I pulled Tucker's book down from the shelf, and the quote is indeed there, from "a report to the Central Committee of November 1928."⁶⁰ Edele claims that I have confused it with another speech from 1931, citing this latter text from marxists.org.

These errors are typical of Edele's review. Regarding Stalin's alleged remarks of August 19, 1939, Edele writes that "even the article McMeekin cites for proof of the authenticity of this document notes that it seems to originate from an article published in the French *La Revue universelle*." There are four factual errors in this sentence. First, the article I cite says nothing of the kind, concluding that the original version likely "leaked out from the Kremlin."⁶¹ Nor do I cite this article as "proof," noting quite openly in both the text of *Stalin's War* (84) and in a footnote on that very page that the document's authenticity is in question, and that many, though not all, historians view it as a forgery. Third, Edele says that the original is "in an archive holding *foreign-origin* documents," sourcing this to the website of RGVA or the "Russian Government Archive of Military History," containing records of the Soviet military and government organs between 1918-1940.⁶² Finally, the source Edele cites to refute the supposed "proof" I do not claim to be offering is a Russian-language article published in *Novy Mir* by T.S. Bushuyeva in 1994. In fact Bushuyeva does write there that "it is necessary to compare [the

⁵⁹ British war cabinet minutes, September 17, 1939, in The National Archives of the UK in Kew Gardens, CAB 65/1; and Corbin to Bonnet, September 20, 1939, in the Quai d'Orsay archives in La Courneuve, Paris, 92 CPCOM/286.

⁶⁰ Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power. The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 70-71.

⁶¹ Carl O. Nordling, in *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 19 (2006): 93-106.

⁶² Edele cites the boilerplate description of the "Kharakteristika fondov" at <http://rgvarchive.ru/ob-arkhive/kharakteristika-fondov.shtml>. This is the website for RGVA, the Russian State Government Military Archive. The principal holdings listed here are "documents on the history of the creation and development of the Soviet military authorities and the armed forces of the USSR (Red Army) in the period 1918-1940." Edele has likely confused RGVA with TsGOA, formerly TsKhIDK, aka the "Osoby" or "Special Archive" of trophy documents from German-occupied Europe after World War II, which is located around the corner from RGVA (and now administered from the same central building). Having worked extensively in both archives, before and after the administrative reshuffle, I am aware of this difference.

French] version with the original,” but adds crucially, in a passage Edele ignores, “however, it is impossible to do this, since it is in the archive behind seven seals and in the near future they are unlikely to publish a facsimile of this undoubtedly historical document, which so openly exposed the aggressiveness of the USSR’s policy.”⁶³

Have I seen the original, hidden ‘behind seven seals,’ myself? No, nor do I claim to. In the darkening atmosphere of Russia today, it is unlikely any historian, let alone a western one, will ever again see the original. This does not mean it does not exist, or that a long and rich conversation around this document has not emerged among historians since 1994, a conversation which is, in itself, worthy of mention. If I am guilty of mentioning this source and discussing its provenance, then so are the other half-dozen-odd historians who have done the same.⁶⁴

In any case, one hardly has to rely on a single conversation to make the case that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and Foreign Affairs Commissar Vyacheslav Molotov, by agreeing to a cynical deal with Germany’s Adolf Hitler, were angling to embroil Nazi Germany and the western powers into war. To imply that I have based my interpretation of Stalin’s foreign policy in 1939 on this one disputed source is absurd. I also cite Molotov’s draft for an agreement with Nazi Germany written in consultation with Stalin on the same day (August 19, 1939), in which, I say, “lies a critical clue to Stalin’s thinking,” along with the whole course of Soviet-German negotiations preceding the agreement signed on August 23. My interpretation of Stalin’s motives and intentions follows both the available information we have on his thinking and his decisions, and basic common sense: it is borne out, for example, by the contempt Stalin and Defense Commissar Kliment Voroshilov showed the British and French envoys to Moscow that August, by Stalin’s remarks to Giorgi Dimitrov in early September (the veracity of which neither Edele nor Geoffrey Roberts disputes), by Molotov’s frank admission to German Ambassador Count Friedrich-Werner von Schulenberg in September 1939 that the Soviets were hesitating before invading in order to avoid incurring British and French hostility, preferring that Britain and France fight Germany alone, by Molotov’s enthusiastic endorsement of the German invasion of France and the Low Countries the following spring (though hoping that the Germans would get more bloodied up than they did), etc.

It is not clear whether Edele is arguing that Stalin was a principled devotee of “collective security” and the sanctity of east European borders who was prevented from carrying out such an altruistic policy only because of irrational western anti-Communist prejudice, or that he was a pacifist seeking to stave off a European war, rather than exploit one. If not, his critique consists of mere hairsplitting, questioning the veracity of a single source among dozens – a source whose provenance I discuss carefully in the text, a footnote, and the source endnote. The critique also contains errors.

As for Stalin’s speech to the academy graduates on May 5, 1941, Edele’s critique is incorrect. In the endnotes on pages 674-75 of *Stalin’s War*, which Edele discusses, I cite no less than six different versions of the May 5 speech, including three

⁶³ T. S. Bushuyeva, “Proklyvaya – poprobuyu poniat’,” in *Novyi Mir* no. 12 (1994): https://magazines.gorky.media/novyi_mi/1994/12/proklyvaya-poprobujite-ponyat.html. The passage in question reads as follows, in the original Russian: “Конечно, необходимо сравнить этот вариант с подлинником. Однако сделать это невозможно, так как он в архиве за семью печатями и в ближайшее время вряд ли станут обнародовать факсимиле этого безусловно исторического документа, столь откровенно обнажившего агрессивность политики СССР.”

⁶⁴ For example, T. S. Bushuyeva, in the 1994 *Novyi Mir* article just cited; Carl O. Nordling, “Did Stalin Deliver His Alleged Speech of 19 August 1939?,” *op cit*; Marius Broekmeyer, in *Stalin, the Russians, and their War*, trans. Rosalind Buck (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 6-9; Oleg Khlevniuk, in *Stalin. New Biography of a Dictator*, trans. Nora Seligman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 167-168; Heinz Magenheimer, in *Hitler’s War: Germany’s Military Strategy, 1940-1945* (Arms and Armour, 1999), p. 43 and accompanying endnote no. 79; and at much greater length by Mikhail Mel’tyukhov in *Upushchennyi shans Stalina: Sovetskii soiuz i bor’ba za Evropu 1939-1941* (Moscow: Veche, 2000). This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it is broadly representative, including three Russians, two of whom (Bushuyeva and Mel’tyukhov) insist that there is a genuine Russian original, likely an unofficial transcript but one composed by someone present at a meeting with Stalin on this day, and one (Khlevniuk) who thinks the document a forgery. The three “western” authors all credit the source as plausibly genuine, while acknowledging the controversy – as I do.

Russian language transcripts written down, one by a government note-taker and two by eyewitnesses, while noting clearly where and how they diverge. The most controversial bit, in which Stalin may or may not have fingered Germany as a likely military opponent, is clearly qualified in source endnote 7 on page 675, when I say that “after Stalin’s interruption of Khozin, eyewitness accounts diverge.” This citation comes not, *pace* Edele, from a “notorious German revisionist history” but from Stephen Kotkin’s carefully sourced 2018 Stalin biography.⁶⁵

As for Edele’s broader claim, that my whole account is derived from a “notorious German revisionist history,”⁶⁶ Edele is presumably referring to the “Gehlen-Hilger” version of the speech, which has been dissected at length in the article by two professional military historians, Evan Mawdsley and Jürgen Förster (“Hitler and Stalin in Perspective: Secret Speeches on the Eve of Barbarossa”), which I cite.⁶⁷ Mawdsley and Förster both credit this version as plausible and consistent with others, if far from definitive. What eyewitness account is ever definitive?

Meanwhile, the whole dramatic scene I reproduce, wherein Stalin interrupted the speaker to correct him about the now-outdated “peace” policy, is detailed in this “boring Soviet archival version” just as in the others I cite, with slightly different phrasing. The text is in fact both extremely detailed and broadly consistent with the other versions. Edele questions my use of this note-taker’s source on the basis that an archival file number does not match between the document volume I cite and an online version he cites from. I researched this volume in the Lenin Library, not online. I prefer doing my research in archives and libraries, rather than online.⁶⁸

Edele writes that he visited his “university’s library” to get to the bottom of my “convoluted endnote.” He finds the V. A. Nevezhin volume (*Zastol’nye Rechi Stalina. Dokumenty i materialy*) conforms to the “boring Soviet archival version.” The

⁶⁵ Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin*, volume 2, *Waiting for Hitler, 1928-1941* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 862.

⁶⁶ Edele cites here two books, one of which, by Gustav Hilger, is nowhere mentioned in my book or bibliography. The other, which I cite exactly once in the entirety of *Stalin’s War*, is Ernst Topitsch’s *Stalin’s War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987) – a book I thought at least worthy of mention in a kind of hat tip after learning, long after I had chosen my own title, that someone else had beaten me to it. Topitsch’s book may or may not be “notorious,” but the author is Austrian, not German.

⁶⁷ Evan Förster and Evan Mawdsley, “Hitler and Stalin in Perspective: Secret Speeches on the Eve of Barbarossa,” in *War and History* 11:1 (January 2004): 61-103.

⁶⁸ “Vyistuplenie general’nogo sekretarya tsK VKp (b) i. V. stalina pered vyipusknikami voennykh akademii RKKa v Kremle,” May 5, 1941, reproduced in the original Russian as no. 437 in *1941 God. Dokumenty*, eds. Reshin et al. (1998), vol. 2, 158–59. The original of this document is sourced correctly by Reshin *et al* in the Stalin fond at the archive now known as RGASPI, fond 558, opis’ 1, del’ 3808, list’ 1–12, a full reference I give in tribute to them (Edele’s does not include the list or page numbers). It appears that, in this one instance, a typo has crept into my endnote no. 1 on page 674 such that the Stalin fond is listed as 538 instead of 558, which would be significant except that 1) having worked in it extensively in person, I cite the Stalin fond no. 558 from RGASPI correctly several hundred other times in the endnotes, and in the bibliography, showing that this is an idle typo; and 2) in this case I am not even sourcing a text, but crediting the editors of a document volume for having located and reproduced a source which is no longer being given out regularly. If any intrepid readers try to track down the original document at RGASPI, they will of course be told that the Stalin fond is no. 558, as is abundantly clear in the hundreds of other references to it in my book. Readers can also find the source in the volume I cite, which is the point of a source note.

Moreover, to return to the substance of the argument, even this “boring” version by the Soviet government note-taker has Stalin forcibly interrupting Khozin when he gives his toast to Stalin’s “peace policy” (*tost za mirnuyu Stalinskuyu vneshmuyu politiku*) to correct him, emphasizing the need, now that the army has been thoroughly revamped and modernized, etc., to “shift from a defensive to an offensive posture,” (*teper’ nado pereiti ot oborony k nastupleniyu*), “to a military policy of offensive actions” (*ot oborony pereiti k voennoi k voennoi politike nastupatel’nykh deistvii*), to “re-organize our training, our propaganda, our agitation, our press in an offensive spirit” (*ot oborony pereiti k voennoi k voennoi politike nastupatel’nykh deistvii*), etc. I find nothing “boring” about this account.

Nevezhin volume reproduces 5 May 1941 diary entries for V. A. Malyshev and G. M. Dimitrov, both of whom were present for Stalin's speech and noted the interruption and the sharp change in doctrine. (They did not, of course, record the entire speech – why would they have? These are diary entries. They noted the important and novel part of the evening's events, i.e., Stalin's interruption.) Malyshev (279-80) has Stalin interrupting to say that the Red Army must now educate its commanders "in the spirit of the offensive" (*Vospityivat' ikh v dukhe nastupleniya*). Dimitrov's diary entry (281) repeats a similar phrase, then has Stalin conclude more dramatically that the Red Army "must prepare for war" (*nado gotovit'sya k voine*).⁶⁹

Somehow, despite the "research" Edele claims to have done digging into these source notes from what is, after all, a brief four page narrative prologue, he has missed all these citations. Nor does he refer to my citation of an original transcript of another debriefing of a Soviet officer present at the speech (*not* the "Gehlen/Hilger" version), which I discovered myself, a document which is now freely available to researchers at the Politiches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PAAA) in Berlin.⁷⁰

Edele asserts that the only reliable account of this episode is the "boring" version of a Soviet government note-taker – which turns out to be far from boring if you read it. My approach was to seek to disentangle truth from whitewashed official narratives and breathe life into history by citing also from diary entries, witness debriefings, and memoirs – while noting, as I very carefully do, where accounts of a contested event diverge.

Edele writes that I make the "claim that this book is based on revelations from the Soviet archives. It is not." What I write in the book's introduction on page 6 is that I have "re-examined the conflict as a whole in light of newly available Russian documents," including "brand new" discoveries of my own (for example, the Soviet Ministry of Aerodrome Construction files for 1941, the Politburo Special Files for June 1941, real-time telegraphic exchanges between Molotov and Stalin during the Berlin summit of November 1940, data on how Lend-Lease tanks, trucks, and warplanes were incorporated into Red Army units) along with those in document volumes edited by Russian researchers whom I cite copiously and thank profusely. I also draw heavily on US, British, French, German, Polish, and Bulgarian archival sources, many of which, particularly those from Bulgaria and Poland, have not before been used by western historians. Now that Russian archives may be off limits to foreigners for the foreseeable future, this is the only way to research Soviet history.

Roberts disagrees with my interpretation of Stalin's foreign policy and motives. He writes that, masses of plain-as-day evidence to the contrary, "Stalin was far from relishing the prospect of a new imperialist world war," that Stalin sincerely believed in "collective security" and had been "striving for...an anti-Hitler coalition with Britain and France...since 1933." The historical evidence, however, shows that this interpretation of Stalin's foreign policy is groundless. As I explain in the book, the partition of Poland was a Soviet proposal, not a German one, first mooted in Soviet theoretical journals in 1938 and then pursued vigorously through back channels until coming to fruition in August 1939. The evidence I cite to explain Stalin's disinterest in "collective security" also includes Stalin's demotion of Maxim Litvinov from the European desk in May 1937, his "chestnuts" (of, as Roberts prefers, "fire-raking with someone else's hands") speech in March 1939, his sacking of Litvinov and the purging of the Soviet Foreign Ministry of Jews in early May 1939, and the Soviet approaches to the Germans which preceded the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. I also point out that the USSR did not share a border with Czechoslovakia, rendering any putative Soviet guarantee of that country's borders problematic at best, and the unambiguous rejection by Ambassador Ivan Maisky of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's March 1939 guarantee to Poland – a rejection repeated publicly by a Soviet TASS communiqué – which made crystal clear Stalin's real views on 'collective security.'

⁶⁹ Nevezhin, V.A., ed., *Zastol'nyie rechi Stalina. Dokumentyi i materialyi* (Moscow: Airo-XX, 2003).

⁷⁰ "Übersetzung des Berichtes des Generalmajors Naumow über ein Bankett in Moskau am 5.5.41 anlässlich des Abschlusses eines Kriegsakademie-Lehrganges," in PAAA, R 104585.

It is not I, but Roberts in his review, who bases his interpretation of Stalin's foreign policy on a single source – a few remarks of regret Stalin expressed to Dimitrov in early September 1939 that, in a world free of anti-Communist prejudice, he might have done a deal with France and Britain instead of with Nazi Germany (“we preferred agreements with the so-called democratic countries and therefore conducted negotiations. But the English and French wanted us for farmhands and at no cost.”) My interpretation of Stalin's foreign policy fits the known facts of history as it happened; Roberts' rests on a counterfactual argument.

As Ian Johnson points out in his deeply researched recent study, *Faustian Bargain. The Soviet-German Partnership and the Origins of the Second World War* (Oxford, 2021), which came out just after my book did, the partnership between Hitler and Stalin hardly came out of the blue on August 23, 1939.⁷¹ It was not only the prospect of carving up Poland and regaining former Russian territory in Finland, the Baltic states, and Romania which tempted Stalin and Molotov to the negotiating table. As early as January 28, 1939 – long before the “chestnuts” speech, before Stalin sacked Litvinov as an olive branch to Hitler, Soviet officials Klim Voroshilov and Anastas Mikoyan presented the German government with a military-technological wish list *seventeen pages long*, listing 112 items of key need for Soviet military modernization, including “four complete fighter and bomber prototypes, seven engine designs, thirteen different machine gun and bomb designs, nine types of laboratory equipment, and ten kinds of optical and electrical equipment.” As Johnson concludes, in every possible sense, from territorial gains to critical technology transfer, “the Germans had far more to offer than the British and French.”⁷²

As for the Raymond Faymonville case, Roberts accuses me of making unsourced assertions (“McMeekin does not cite any source for these contentions”). In fact endnote 19 on 723-24 of *Stalin's War*, clearly indicates that my discussion of Faymonville was not based on *The Venona Secrets*, which he surmises was my “probable source,” but on the papers of Colonel Ivan D. Yeaton, who spent much of his career in army intelligence tracking Faymonville.⁷³ The *Venona Secrets* has little to say about the Faymonville case beyond the “honey trap” story which Roberts mentions. The point of my discussion of Faymonville in *Stalin's War* is not to gossip about his alleged seduction, but to discuss what he did to influence US policy vis-à-vis Russia. Roberts also refers incorrectly to “General Philip Faymonville”; Faymonville's rank at the time was Colonel. This error seemingly stems from the *Venona Secrets*, where Faymonville is described on p. 218 as “the general.”⁷⁴

As for the substantial point at issue, I am not sure what to make of Roberts' curious argument that Faymonville was, if not a Soviet spy, then an “an American intelligence asset” with whom “an NKVD agent called ‘Electric’ was tasked with getting close to,” though while allowing that this might be “a cover story to disguise the fact that Faymonville was indeed a Soviet agent” and noting that, in any case, “Faymonville was highly sympathetic to the Soviets and their war effort” – just as I say he was. There are plenty of works published in English which still huffily deny that Faymonville had *any* connection with Soviet intelligence, such as Susan Butler's 2015 study *Roosevelt and Stalin: Portrait of a Partnership*.⁷⁵ It seems that Roberts and I agree on this point.

⁷¹ Ian Johnson, *Faustian Bargain. The Soviet-German Partnership and the Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁷² Johnson, *Faustian Bargain*, 202, 207.

⁷³ Hoover Institution Archives, Collection: Yeaton, Ivan D., box 1 (Correspondence, 1939-41) and unpublished memoirs.

⁷⁴ Herbert Romerstein and Eric Breindel, *The Venona Secrets. Exposing Soviet Espionage and America's Traitors* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2000/2001), 218.

⁷⁵ Susan Butler, *Roosevelt and Stalin: Portrait of a Partnership* (New York: Knopf, 2015).

Likewise, I am unsure what to make of Roberts' gratitude for my directing him to a book offer to Stalin made by Simon & Schuster in 1943. The original letter, written by Lincoln Schuster himself, discusses, as a model, the Joseph Davies memoir-Stalinist-advocacy vehicle *Mission to Moscow* published by S & S and invites Stalin to "give the world a far more comprehensive statement of Soviet war and peace aims" than was offered in newspaper interviews, this time "in book form."⁷⁶ Obviously, Stalin would not have been expected to actually write the book, but the aim was clearly to interview him and put together a flattering quickie-autobiographical portrait of Stalin, his background, his views, how he saw the world, etc.

I am glad that Vojin Majstorovic's review discusses some of the book's main themes. I do not in fact argue in the book that a "German victory was preferable in the war," nor does Majstorovic cite any text from my book suggesting this.

I do argue that Prime Minister Winston Churchill's lobbying for a secondary Balkan operation at Teheran was more sensible than is usually asserted by his critics, though pointing out logistical hurdles, not least the "dauntingly mountainous region" between what is now Italy and Slovenia. This is why, as I explain, both Roosevelt and Churchill mooted an "Adriatic landing" instead of a direct push from northern Italy overland. True, the Dinaric Alps would have made logistics difficult pushing inland from the Yugoslav coast, but they would also have shielded the landings along a lightly guarded coastline. And the idea, which was, *pace* Majstorovic, that of Churchill and his military advisers and not my own, was never a replacement for landings in France, but a complement to them, to draw German troops into the Balkans in order to ease the pressure on both the eastern front and the upcoming Cross-Channel landing in France. I never argue, as Majstorovic claims I do, that the Allies "should have replaced western Europe with southern Europe as the site of the second front." Again, he cites no evidence to support this claim.

The same is true when he writes that I "place less responsibility on the Germans for the mass murder of 3.3 million Soviet prisoners of war than on Stalin and...Molotov for failing to sign the Geneva and Hague conventions." Again no text is cited. What I actually say (320-21) is that "more than half, something like 57.5%," of "Red Army prisoners taken on the eastern front would die in captivity" – citing the same percentage Majstorovic does, despite his claim that I ignore this data – that many died from "summary shooting but most from starvation and disease, along with complications from battlefield injuries (or from beatings by camp guards)." I point out that Soviet POWs were "frog-marched on foot and then warehoused in crude barbed-wire encampments out in the open," and were so badly fed by the Germans that a witness described them as "walking skeletons." I also write, in tribute to recent historical literature Majstorovic claims I ignore, that "it is welcome that the plight of these unfortunate millions of [Soviet war prisoners] has begun to be taken seriously as a war crime." My only comment on Stalin is that "we should not forget...that at least part of the reason Soviet war prisoners suffered so terribly is that they were forsaken by their own government." As they indeed were. The phrase "At least part of the reason," Majstorovic argues, means that I place "less responsibility on the Germans" than on Soviet leaders. This is a groundless insinuation.

Majstorovic's citations from the text are not correct. He writes that I describe the Battle of Moscow as Soviet General Georgi Zhukov's "suicidal last stand" (341). I was not describing the Battle of Moscow of December 1941 on page 341, a major Soviet victory I discuss two chapters later – in different circumstances following the arrival of the *rasputitsa* muds which slowed down German armor and Stalin's transfer of 15 divisions, 1700 tanks and 1800 warplanes, from Siberia to the Moscow front (Far Eastern defenses that Edele claims in his review were never seriously downgraded), along with the influx of Lend-Lease tanks, trucks, and warplanes – but the desperate measures Zhukov took in *October* 1941, when Moscow was being frantically evacuated, and Zhukov warned Muscovites on the radio that the "fascist German forces" had "overwhelmed our forces" (341).

⁷⁶ RGASPI, Fond 558 (Stalin), Opis' 11, Del. 221, list' 58. The document number Roberts cites does not match the archival list number. Perhaps it is from an older filing system?

Majstorovic errs when he objects to my estimate that “nine-tenths” of Great Terror victims in 1937-1938 were ethnic minorities, not Russians. The figure is not my own estimate, but that of Timothy Snyder in *Bloodlands*. It also appears Majstorovic’s claim confuses *execution* numbers with *arrest* numbers: the figures Majstorovic cites from Lynne Viola’s book *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial* are for “arrests,” whereas Snyder’s figures (625,483 out of 681,692 “executions carried out for political crimes”) are for executions.⁷⁷

Clearly the point I am making in *Stalin’s War* is that, at the time when some historians claim that Stalin was a misunderstood devotee of ‘collective security’ and international law who was unfairly victimized by western anti-Communist prejudice, he was overseeing the executions of hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities who were *targeted as such*: Koreans, Poles, Ukrainians, Germans, Tatars, etc. Surely the exact percentage of minorities vs ethnic Russians victimized in the Terror matters less than the fact that this was happening, and what it said about Stalin as a statesman, his character, and how his foreign counterparts should have read his actions and foreign policy.

As for Majstorovic’s comment on the numbers of Russian prisoners of war “repatriated” to the USSR killed or sent to camps, I stand by my own estimates. As noted above, I try to corroborate Soviet government numbers with independent sources whenever possible. Surely any count of the victims of one of Stalin’s most sensitive and controversial crimes can only be an approximation. Majstorovic insists that one suspiciously precise official figure invalidates all other estimates. I respectfully disagree.

In terms of Majstorovic’s objection to my reckoning of the Lend-Lease material contribution to the Soviet war effort of roughly \$11 billion as the equivalent of “over \$1 trillion today,” he is right that I do not cite official sources in this case. The reason is that I do not trust them if they cannot be independently verified. Majstorovic’s cites, for example, the US embassy in Moscow, which “states that the American aid of \$11.3 billion is equivalent to \$180 billion in today’s dollars,” apparently based on a conversion figure of \$15.93 today to \$1 then, or 15.9 to 1. If you can’t trust the US government to accurately render the systematic debasement of its own currency over the past 80 years, then who can you trust?

If we go by gold, the most consistent historical measurement of value over time, the dollar conversion from today, April 18, 2022 (\$1990 per ounce) to the early 1940s (\$35 per ounce) is 56.8 to 1. Silver comes out at 74 to 1 (\$25.90 per ounce today against a standard price, c. 1940-43, of \$.35).⁷⁸ If we compare the prices of military-industrial wares relevant to the book, such as a brand new Lend-Lease Willys Jeep, for which the US taxpayer paid \$642 in 1942, versus a Jeep Wagoneer today (\$86,995), the conversion is 134 to 1.⁷⁹ Or take a state-of-the-art tank like the Sherman M4A2 favored by the Red Army, which priced out at \$33,000 in 1942, vs. \$8.5 million today for an M1A2, yielding a dollar conversion rate of 257 to 1.⁸⁰ With a state-of-the-art pursuit plane such as a Bell P-39 Airacobra (Stalin’s beloved *Kobrushka*) in 1942-44 (\$50,000) vs. an F-16 fighter today (\$4.2 billion), the conversion would come out at – 84,000 to 1.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 107.

⁷⁸ <https://goldprice.org>; <https://sdbullion.com/silver-price-by-year>.

⁷⁹ <https://www.cafmn.org/1942-willys-jeep.html>; <https://www.motorbiscuit.com/how-much-fully-loaded-2022-jeep-grand-wagoneer/>.

⁸⁰ <https://militaryhistorynow.com/2014/10/22/furious-11-essential-facts-about-the-m4-herman-tank/>; <https://www.therichest.com/the-biggest/top-10-most-expensive-modern-battle-tanks/>.

⁸¹ https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Bell_P-39_Airacobra; [https://www.flightglobal.com/fixed-wing/usa-approves-jordan-to-buy-16-f-16c/d-fighters/147374.article](https://www.flightglobal.com/flightglobal.com/fixed-wing/usa-approves-jordan-to-buy-16-f-16c/d-fighters/147374.article).

Obviously, it is difficult to accurately compare prices over time in view of the complex permutations involving comparable 'baskets of goods,' cost versus standard of living, technological change and product quality. My conversion of \$1 in early 1940s to \$100 today is not meant to be mathematically precise to the nth degree of precision, but to give a ballpark estimate helpful to readers in an era when the US dollar is practically melting away (with a current annual headline inflation, that is, debasement, rate of 8%, which many economists believe is grossly low).

Still, Majstorovic is right that I did not explain my reasoning in *Stalin's War* behind the 100 to 1 estimate, and perhaps I should have, as I have done in earlier books. Alas the book was already 800+ pages, and I think my publishers would have had a heart attack had I suggested adding a four-page essay on historical currency conversions, as I did in *History's Greatest Heist*.⁸² I am endlessly fascinated by such problems, but not everyone shares my enthusiasm. Still, I am thankful to Majstorovic for letting me clear this up now, and I hope that he and other readers of H-Diplo, and *Stalin's War*, will be satisfied by my reasoning.

I find it revealing that, for all my reviewers' "quibbling" over citations and currency conversions, none of them, as Warren Kimball rightly notes, challenges my central argument that (in Kimball's words) "excessive lend-lease to Russia put the Soviet Union in a position to dominate Eastern Europe after the war." Kimball would have preferred more discussion in this forum of the Second World War counterfactuals posed in *Stalin's War* about "grand strategy and high politics," lamenting that the reviewers and I alike have been "distracted by fascination for the details." I respectfully contend that the devil is always in the details. I encourage interested H-Diplo readers who have questions to read the book and come to their own conclusions.

⁸² Sean McMeekin, *History's Greatest Heist. The Looting of Russia by the Bolsheviks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), xii-xv.