Stalin’s Wars Roundtable Review
Introduction by Warren F. Kimball

Reviewed Work:

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Thirty years ago, this would have been an heretical book, beyond mere left-revisionism. Twenty years ago, it would have been courageous, controversial, and condemned. Ten years ago, it would have roiled the waters, but could not then have contributed much in the way of new evidence to the debate. Today, three decades after the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union disintegrated, this “re-visioning” of Josef Stalin as “warlord,” receives a respectful reception, whatever the disagreements, from a wide range of accomplished historians (thanks to Diane Labrosse’s tireless recruiting efforts). That alone speaks volumes.

The general consensus of the reviews is that:

(a) Roberts has provided the best, most comprehensive English-language presentation of the new evidence revealed by Soviet-era sources that became available starting in the mid-1980s;

(b) Roberts’ interpretation of Stalin’s motives, goals, and actions is, for most of the reviewers, uncomfortably positive;

(c) Roberts demonstrates that, for the most part, Stalin was an effective warlord during the Second World War, but to call him “indispensable,” as Roberts does, is well over the top. For example, none of the reviewers accepted Roberts’ efforts to explain Stalin’s “catastrophic failure” in June 1941. In Roberts’ response to the reviewers, he asserts that he corrects, not overcorrects, a distorted image of Stalin created by cold war propaganda and the polemics of destalinisation. Whatever the reviewers’ disagreements with some specifics, they all seem to agree that overall Roberts has succeeded.

(d) treating Stalin-as-warlord during World War II and the Cold War as a “continuum” is a constructive and sensible way to look at history.

I would add a gloss on those points of consensus:

(a) One anonymous scholar who wishes to avoid ideological disputes and, on those grounds, declined to review the book, dismissed claims of new evidence because “there are maybe
25 footnotes to archives--and many of these overlap on just a few files.” Perhaps. But all those who reviewed the book agreed with Zubok’s observation that “Roberts sums up impressive amount of new archival evidence: diaries, and all kind of other sources, Western and Soviet, that have been painstakingly collected by other researchers, . . . Most of the Russian new evidence has been already published in Russian, yet Roberts is one of the first scholars who incorporates it into Western historiography.” That is a huge contribution. Yet, as Roberts wrote recently about his research since 1996 in Soviet era archives in Moscow -- “The Presidential Archive, the most important archive for materials on high-level politics during the Soviet era, remained firmly closed to foreign scholars.”¹ When I recently asked one Russian historian about access for Russian scholars to that archive, he replied that if anything remains closed, only the archivists know about it – a classic “catch 22.”

(b) It is good for historians to feel uncomfortable.

(c) Being “indispensable” is a too-high hurdle. It makes a silk purse out of sow’s ear to claim, as Roberts does, that the Winter War against Finland was anything less than an embarrassment and near-failure of warlordship. Similarly Roberts’ attempt to explain away Stalin’s failure to heed Soviet intelligence about German intentions in June 1941. Roberts argues that while the Soviet leader knew of German preparations and expected some sort of attack, he did not expect the massive strategic attack that Hitler launched. Instead, Stalin seemed to be planning on how to crush the German Army once war broke out. The disconnect in such logic is apparent in this short paragraph that I’ve written, and even more so in the book. “Strategic defense had no place in the doctrinal universe of the Soviet High command,” wrote Roberts (p. 80), but whatever the strategic doctrine of Stalin and the Stavka, it proved inadequate and nearly disastrous in 1941. Hardly the hallmark of “the greatest military leader of the twentieth century,” to quote the over-the-top dust-jacket phrasing. Roberts dismisses the Suvorov [Rezun] thesis that Stalin planned a preemptive strike against the German and that Hitler attacked in order to beat the Soviets to the punch, but that still leaves an indelible portrait of Stalin as inept and indecisive.

Roberts’ main and very persuasive thesis (advocated by David Glantz) about Soviet military strategy--that Stalin and the Stavka were and remained committed to the “cult of attack and counterattack”--does not explain Stalin’s actions in June 1941, but it does offer a very useful structure for understanding how Stalin waged war thereafter. The “cult of attack and counterattack” described throughout the book was a strategy that ultimately won the war, and by the time of the pivotal Kursk battle, Stalin and his generals had come to realize that “strategic defense” could set up offensive opportunities.

But that military doctrine combined with Stalin’s callous disregard for human life created one of his most monstrous mistakes -- massive and unnecessary casualty rates (mentioned by Roberts). That trenchant criticism of Stalin as warlord came from within in the mid-

1980s as Soviet, soon-to-be-Russian, historians whispered during meetings of a joint British-American-Soviet project on the history of the Second World War. Those cautious whispers surfaced with publication of the book, *Allies at War* (New York, 1994; Moscow, 1995). The final paragraph of the essay written by a Russian historian about Soviet military strategy summarized the total casualties (20 million for the two armies) on the Russian front, concluding that “such was the enormous price of the direct confrontation of the main forces of both countries on the battlefield. For the Red Army it could and should have been lower.” (p. 52.)

Whatever Stalin’s successes, I would suggest that the only historically indispensable Second World War warlord was Adolf Hitler. Without his all too often shrewd but ultimately insane leadership there is no World War Two as we know it. I leave it to novelists (and Niall Ferguson?) to speculate on what might have been.

(d) The Second World War/Cold War continuum has political validity. (Of course history is an unbroken skein.) Yet that assumes that the Cold War was a war, with a warlord, in the same sense as the Second World War. World War II grand strategy combined politics and the battlefield, requiring a constant and forceful combination of commander-in-chief and international political leader. Not so for the Soviet Union in the Cold War era of conflict by proxies when Soviet leadership was essentially a matter of politics, however threatening. (Perhaps Roberts and Zubok subtly give that difference by not capitalizing “cold war” -- or is that ee cummings at work?) Once the Second World War ends, the book becomes a standard analysis of early Cold War politics. Roberts emphasizes the provocative actions taken by the Americans and the West rather than Stalin’s harsh measures in East Europe as causing the Cold War and ending Stalin’s interest in international cooperation. But that is an old, well-worn argument. However much I agree that Stalin looked for a cooperative postwar relationship with the great powers that would secure both Soviet safety and interests, a “great” war leader would not have prompted Kennedy-Pipe to ask (perceptively): “how [did] the Generalissimo came to misread the international politics of the United States in these questions, providing for a Cold War structure that certainly the Soviet dictator did not wish for.” How indeed?

Then there is ideology, a word that has been tossed about surprisingly little in these reviews, but quite a bit in other reviews of the book. Within limits, ideology is productive here. After all, the historiography of Stalin’s leadership has been clouded by those both Roberts and Pleshakov call the “cold war polemicists.” But those who say that “Stalin’s victory over Hitler should rather be seen as a defeat for the half of Europe that became subsumed under his totalitarian rule” (as quoted by Pleshakov) are an easy target. Their a-historical vision is wishful, not realistic. Time and again they have backed away from that whinge when confronted with the military reality that victory over Hitler and his allies required the massive force of the Red Army. Again in Pleshakov’s words: “Roberts also deplores ‘the more subtle downgrading’ of Stalin by authors [diarists and memoirists like Churchill] who ‘sidelined the strategic importance of the Soviet-German conflict and reduced its role in the overall narrative of the Second World War.’ . . . [W]ith all due respect, Iwo Jima was not a Stalingrad.”
But with nearly two decades of post-Cold War scholarship behind us, surely we are beyond the point where the Pacific War or even the Normandy invasion can be viewed as equal in scope or significance to the Red Army's campaigns on the eastern fronts. That does not take away from the bravery of Private Ryan or from the importance of the defeat of Japan (which inserted the United States into the geopolitics of East Asia), but it does put the Second World War in proper perspective. Hitler's Germany was defeated in Europe by the Soviet Union. The Normandy invasion ensured the presence of Anglo-American forces in western Europe at war's end, but it did not defeat Hitler. Had the Russians not stopped the Germany Army at the gates of Moscow, then won at Stalingrad and Kursk, and then rolled through central Europe, the world we live in today would not exist. The Red Army fought successfully for three years before The Second Front became reality. The British fought longer and just as bravely, but at best could only have quarantined the Germans on the continent, and then only with American help. Someone led that winning Soviet war effort, costly as it was. That leader, Josef Stalin, was without question a successful warlord.

I leave postmodern ideological disputes to Geoff Roberts and his critics.

Because much in the reviews, and the book, focuses on the politics of war, a few words on those issues -- which are the ones that provide a bridge to the politics of the Cold War. There are numerous examples: the failure/refusal to send the Red Army into Warsaw in autumn 1944; whether or not Stalin hoped to pursue a cooperative internationalist course after the war; whether or not the Sovietization of Europe was planned or caused or was the result of the Cold War dynamic, and so on. Historians can and have guessed about the answers to those and similar questions for decades. Historians have tried to construct ex post facto answers by examining what happened. We may never be able to do any better than that. Still, the existence of the "Presidential Archive" and the all too sparse but beguiling comments of historians who have gotten glimpses into those records, suggests that full access could finally let us know what Stalin thought, what he planned, and perhaps most intriguing -- how he reacted to Western policies.² Thanks to Roberts' research, we have come further down the path, but not far enough.

Weinberg questions Roberts' dismissal of apparent/rumored Soviet flirtations with making a separate peace with Germany, while describing his "obsession" over the possibility that Churchill was reaching out to Berlin. Today it seems clear that none of the Big Three ever gave such a separate peace effort any serious consideration. But it is equally clear that those suspicions affected the politics of war. Whatever Stalin's fears, why did he sanction feelers that he knew (or must have known) would reach the Anglo-Americans? Where do his obsessive fears and provocations (as he would have called such feelers) fit into the story of Stalin as war leader?

Still on the politics of war, I confess to puzzlement at the assertion of reviewer Thomas Maddux that "At Tehran and Yalta Stalin encouraged Churchill and FDR to show their cards on the major

² I am fascinated by the revelations about Stalin's reactions to FDR's famous "promise" in May 1942 of a Second Front that are found in Oleg Rzheshevsky (ed.), War and Diplomacy: The Making of the Grand Alliance: Documents from Stalin's Archives (Amsterdam: Harwood Publ., 1996).
issues and responded to them by collecting their concession chips from the table and readily agreeing on what appeared to be less important Soviet concerns . . . .” Plausible, as far as it goes. But it doesn’t go nearly far enough. Roosevelt and Churchill were remarkably candid in their meetings with Stalin because (a) he was their ally, and (b) they hoped to establish a long-term cooperative postwar relationship. Moreover, as David Reynolds has suggested, Stalin suffered a major setback at Yalta when he failed to get the harsh reparations and dismemberment of Germany he wanted and expected. Maddux goes on to state that “Stalin continued his successful manipulation that he had earlier practiced in using the absence of an Allied second front in Europe in pressing Churchill and FDR to accede to the primacy of the Soviet role in defeating Nazi Germany and, thereby, the legitimacy of Soviet demands.” Certainly the Soviet leader tried to use the Second Front issue to gain leverage over Anglo-American actions. But Churchill and Roosevelt still suspended supply convoys, launched TORCH, invaded Italy, kept the atomic secret, and conducted an invasion of western Europe that was, in good part, designed to ensure that the Anglo-Americans were on the continent, in force, as a counterweight to the Soviet Union. Successful manipulation?

When all is said and done, the reviewers, each in their own way, echo the hard question Kennedy-Pipe poses, a question, she writes, “that Roberts does not really address. . . . the relationship between the techniques of politics and the purposes of politics. The assumption that seems to guide Roberts here is that there is a disjuncture between the two – that one can admire political technique, political skill in war and peace independently of what one considers the ends of politics to be and whether or not the relevant political system is addressing them. Yet it is surely not off the point to suggest that this is far from being clear. It was Hannah Arendt, in Eichmann in Jerusalem, who pointed out most clearly that the mark of barbarism is the failure to connect a political system and all the values it sustains with the personal virtues of its inhabitants.”

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