Stalin’s Wars Roundtable Review
Review by Thomas R. Maddux

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Geoffrey Roberts’ *Stalin’s Wars: From World War to Cold War 1939-1945* is a very impressive study that brings together his previous contributions in four different books, numerous influential articles, and new research in Russian archives. This study is freshest and most stimulating on Stalin’s leadership during WWII, less groundbreaking on the Cold War, and most debatable with respect to Roberts’ thesis on the Cold War. The author suggests that Stalin did not want a Cold War, although his actions contributed to it. Furthermore, Roberts considers the Cold War as perhaps avoidable if Western leaders had been more understanding of Stalin and the Soviet Union’s critical and enormously costly contributions during WWII and the intensity Soviet security concerns about Germany and Japan in the postwar negotiations.

The research in Russian archives and experienced perspective that shapes Roberts’ study helps end the disconnect in Cold War literature since the 1960s. Traditional and revisionist U.S. historians, who neither read Russian nor had access to Russian archives during the Cold War, relied selectively on the limited literature on Stalin and Soviet foreign policy and found Russian specialists who would support their preferred assumptions about Stalin’s perspective and objectives. Traditionalists stressed a view of Stalin as the unreliable leader of a totalitarian regime with a Marxist-Leninist vision. This ensured that Stalin’s wartime cooperation with the West would last only as long as it was expedient and served Stalin’s interests from resistance to Adolf Hitler and the German Wehrmacht, to securing a Soviet sphere in postwar Eastern Europe, and to guiding relations with the Western European communist parties for eventual communist expansion beyond the Eastern Europe sphere. On the other hand, revisionist historians have usually stressed Stalin’s preoccupation with his own security and therefore the security of the Soviet state with little more than an expedient commitment to the rhetoric of Marxist-Leninism during this period. The revisionist’s Stalin is not the “Uncle Joe” of wartime American images; he has his bloody, repressive, suspicious nature from the 1930s through the postwar purges; but in applying a pragmatic mindset on Stalin, they played down or dismissed any ideological framework to Stalin’s perspective. In the final analysis the revisionist’s Stalin is focused on security and prepared for an enduring accommodation with the Western powers after the war.

Roberts is most persuasive in his analysis of Stalin’s wartime leadership of Soviet resistance to Germany and his diplomatic maneuvering with Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roberts makes very effective use of Stalin’s daily appointment schedule and other Soviet sources to challenge persuasively the post-1953 discrediting of Stalin’s leadership of the Red Army’s resistance. The author does not defend Stalin against all criticism or deny his unyielding ruthlessness, especially in 1941-1942 towards Red
Army leaders, and with respect to Soviet soldiers who retreated in the face of the Wehrmacht’s strategic offensive in this period and climatic battles at Stalingrad and Kursk. Roberts depicts Stalin as a product of Soviet offensive doctrine and preoccupied with stopping Hitler after June 22 1941. Roberts provides enough operational detail to support his thesis that Stalin’s wartime leadership was indispensable, even more so than the other Big Three leaders, without losing the focus on Stalin and the transitions from the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact to the final wartime conferences with FDR and Harry Truman at Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam.

Speculation over who was more or less indispensable should not detract from the value of Roberts’ evaluation and his ability to make a shift in emphasis from Stalin’s military command to his supervision of wartime diplomacy with Churchill and FDR and preparations for shaping the final peace settlement. In the three chapters where diplomacy takes increasing precedence over climatic battles, Roberts reinforces existing assessments of Stalin as focused on the preparation of positions that would establish a Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe, regain Russian territories lost in the East and West reaching back to the Russo-Japanese war of 1905, and the acquisition of new territorial and strategic positions whenever possible on both fronts such as access to the Dardanelles, bases in Turkey, and a colony in the Mediterranean. The destruction of German and Japanese power remained a key consideration in Stalin’s planning. Roberts also confirms Stalin’s negotiating style. At Tehran and Yalta Stalin encouraged Churchill and FDR to show their cards on the major 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 such as the Yalta Declaration on Liberated Europe or the occupation of Italy. 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.

When Roberts moves the origins of the Cold War, the ground becomes more contested. With less than a hundred pages on Stalin’s leadership from 1945 through the Korean War to 1953, Roberts necessarily has less space and fewer new documents to offer a significantly new assessment of Stalin’s contribution to this conflict. Roberts’ central thesis is that Stalin did not want a Cold War, tried to work out disagreements with the Western powers over Poland, Eastern Europe, Iran, and Germany, and only when the Western powers launched the Marshall Plan for the recovery of Western Europe did Stalin abandon cooperation, revive the Cominform, launch Western European and U.S. communist party resistance to Western policies, and slam the door on Winston Churchill’s Iron Curtain. Roberts does move beyond this standard revisionist view from the late 1960s to a repeated affirmation that “Stalin’s own actions and ambitions did contribute to the outbreak of the cold war ... [since] Stalin was determined to establish a Soviet sphere of influence in the states that bordered European Russia ... [and] Stalin had visions of a people’s democratic Europe—a Europe of left-wing regimes under Soviet and communist influence.” (pp. 24-25).
Roberts grants some degree of primacy to Stalin's security concerns as the main short-term Soviet objective, and, consequently, floats the possibility of avoiding the Cold War if only the Western powers had recognized Stalin's priorities and backed off on securing at least the part of Germany they occupied and the rest of Western Europe against Stalin's more long range ideological and political expectations. As Roberts concludes, the Cold War resulted from "the political limitations of his [Stalin's] dictatorial regime. But it also occurred because western politicians ... were unable to see that beyond the alleged communist threat was an opportunity to arrive at a postwar settlement that could have averted the cold war...." (p. 374).

What confirms the strength of Roberts' credibility as a historian on this most debatable issue is that he does not present only a lawyer-like advocacy for this perspective. Instead, throughout the study Roberts presents enough quotations from Stalin's comments or directives in primary sources to suggest the opposite assessment of Stalin: that his ideological preconceptions and expectations were such that the Western powers were wise to shut the door whenever possible on Stalin even at the cost of precipitating the ensuing Cold War in Europe with Germany at the core.

Roberts first addresses the question of Stalin's objectives in his chapter on the "Unholy Alliance: Stalin's Pact with Hitler". In quoting from Comintern leader Georgi Dimitrov's diary on September 7, 1939, Roberts raises the war-revolution thesis as Stalin discusses the benefits of a war among the capitalist countries in which they weaken each other and "we can maneuver, pit one side against the other to set them fighting with each other as fiercely as possible." (p. 36) Although Roberts suggests that Stalin may have been rationalizing to Dimitrov regarding the recent abandonment of anti-Nazi policy, the public polestar of Soviet policy since 1933, the author does suggest that "underlying Stalin's calculations about the Nazi-Soviet pact was a fundamentalist vision of the inevitability of capitalist crises and imperialist wars," even if Stalin gave priority to defense and avoidance of war with Germany. (p. 38)

Roberts returns to this theme at several points in his study as Stalin's focus on stopping Hitler shifts to the wartime negotiations with Churchill and Roosevelt. Despite his mastery of the literature, Roberts declines to use the imperial-revolutionary paradigm on Stalin that Vlad Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov developed in Inside the Kremlin's Cold War. These authors recognized, as does Roberts, that Stalin retained communist political and ideological perspectives and at the same time strove to achieve imperial interests. What Roberts discusses in many ways provides additional support for the usefulness of this paradigm. The abolition of the Communist International in May 1943 illustrates how Roberts discusses both sides of the paradigm. (pp. 168-174) First, Stalin clearly viewed the international communist parties as his parties and wanted them to act more as national parties pursuing tactics and strategies relevant to their national situations in the latter stages of the war and postwar situation. Although Roberts places the timing for the abolition of the Comintern in the context of the crisis over the Katyn forest massacre and Stalin's desire to bolster the position of the Polish communist party as a legitimate
nationalist force, he clearly depicts Stalin as integrating his diplomatic and communist considerations.

Roberts continues with this perspective through the Tehran and Yalta conferences and into the postwar maneuvering and negotiations. The author views Stalin as pleased with his relations with Churchill and FDR as long as he achieved his major strategic objectives with respect to Germany, the second front issue, and a sphere in Eastern Europe. Roberts depicts Stalin as prepared to accept a Western sphere in the short run but “Stalin’s emergent goals were political and ideological as well as strategic. The Europe that the Soviet leader sought to dominate would be a continent transformed by social and economic upheavals and by communist political advance.” Noting a fundamental divergence between the views of Western leaders and Stalin’s “emergent vision of a radical transformation of European politics,” Roberts highlights the beginnings of the disagreements that would lead to the Cold War in Europe (p. 190) and retains his perspective through the Yalta conference and into the negotiations with the new administration of Harry Truman. (pp. 222, 231, 236-237, 253, 291-292)

In his commendable effort to stick with the available primary sources on Stalin and his advisers, Roberts has given less consideration to the impact of historical and emotional factors that enter into the perspectives on both sides when disagreements after the war came to the forefront. Roberts does emphasize Stalin’s and the Soviet sense that they were receiving insufficient recognition for their superior sacrifices in the defeat of Hitler and inadequate respect as a great power as the U.S. complained about the Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe, starting with the composition of the Polish government, then moving to Romania and Bulgaria and shifting to focus most critically on Germany. (p. 300) However, Roberts offers little discussion of how Stalin’s experiences with the Western powers may have affected his perceptions, particularly the maneuverings in the thirties culminating in the failure to negotiate an alliance against Hitler. On the other side, Roberts also gives little recognition to Western, particularly American perceptions of Stalin, his domestic policies in the thirties, and diplomatic maneuvers in 1939-1941. These perceptions and emotional attitudes which become intensely critical and emotional by 1940 were not wiped clean by the wartime cooperation. When friction developed in 1945-1947, these attitudes made it very difficult to achieve the type of accommodation that Stalin wanted in the short-run and that Roberts wishes had occurred to head off a full-blown Cold War.

The absence of a consideration of these factors weakens Robert’s final chapters on the Cold War. Roberts correctly stresses Stalin’s reaction of abandoning his hopes for cooperation with the West in response to the Marshall plan, but he does not provide a persuasive analysis of why. Since the U.S. backed off on pressuring Stalin on the Eastern European sphere, Germany clearly was a central issue. When Stalin rejected the U.S. offer of a treaty on the disarmament and demilitarization of Germany, the plan proposed by Secretary of State James Byrnes in April 1946, and declined to participate in the Marshall Plan, Roberts suggests at various points that Stalin did not want to lose the opportunity to have influence in all of Germany, not just the Soviet zone, and that the Marshall Plan appeared as a threat
to the Eastern European sphere. (pp. 314-319, 347, 352-355) Roberts does not point out that by unleashing his communist parties in Italy and France and elsewhere against approval of the Marshall Plan, Stalin confirmed both Roberts’ perspective on Stalin’s long-range communist and ideological hopes and the U.S. conclusion that Stalin was sufficiently unreliable and dangerous with respect to Germany and Western Europe that the U.S. had to bolster in a number of ways its Western allies and what became West Germany.

It should be emphasized that Roberts’ latest work is the most impressive English language source on Stalin’s wartime leadership and very professional in the way that the author provides primary evidence on both sides of the challenging quest to determine what Stalin was after with respect to the Western powers.