

Stalin's Wars Roundtable Review
Review by Constantine Pleshakov



Reviewed Work:

Geoffrey Roberts. *Stalin's Wars. From World War to Cold War 1939-1953.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 496 pp. Illustrations, maps, chronology, bibliographical references, index. ISBN-10: 0300112041.

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COMMONSENSE STALIN

As every autocrat, Joseph Stalin posed as a Renaissance man, passing on his judgment on Goethe, Dostoyevsky, Eisenstein, city planning, genetics, crops, gardens, cars, and even linguistics, but the only *métier* he practiced seriously was that of a general (dictator or mass murderer is not an occupation). Basically, that's what Geoffrey Roberts' *Stalin's Wars* is about – Stalin as a warlord. The fruits of wars the dictator fought for most of his life constitute his real legacy, so books like Roberts' are highly relevant, despite the multi-volume Staliniana accumulated in the libraries over the past fifty years.

Constantine Pleshakov teaches at Mount Holyoke College and lives in Amherst, MA. He is the co-author of *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War. From Stalin to Khrushchev [with Vladislav Zubok], (1996), which won the Lionel Gelber Prize as a best English-language book on international relations in 1996. His most recent book is Stalin's Folly: The Tragic First Ten Days of WWII On the Eastern Front. He is working on a book on the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe.*

To the main point of the book. Roberts admits that he wrote it with an *über* task in mind. "This book," he says, "has tried to show that the contemporaneous perception of Stalin's war leadership was closer to the truth of the matter than many of the layers of historical interpretation that followed." (p. 373) The contemporaneous perception of Stalin's war leadership is also defined by Roberts as "commonsense," and I, personally, like the term, though not sure whether I would've used it myself. So what is the "commonsense" Stalin as a war leader?

Roberts calls Stalin's presence "crucial" for the victory and the generalissimo himself a "great war leader not because he had won but because he had done so much to achieve victory." (p. 373) With a certain degree of moral discomfort, I suppose I have to agree on both accounts, though the adjective "great" is, perhaps, a bit excessive. Stalin was a pretty *good* wartime leader. Looking at the first ten days of World War Two on the Eastern Front, from June 22, 1941 and on, as I did in my book, two things about Stalin's reaction shock a writer: first, his totally inept response to the German attack (the man ordered a counterstrike, in other words, a mass murder of his own troops guaranteeing an easy victory in the borderland for the Germans) and then the pace and nature of Stalin's recovery about ten days later. Recovery or even transfiguration (the theological tinge of the term is perhaps appropriate for someone deemed a living god). By the end of 1941, the wartime Stalin does something the pre-war Stalin loathed: he delegates power and, more, he delegates power to the generals, potential breeders of Bonapartism, the bogymen of his whole political life. Furthermore, after the war, Stalin, who had been in the habit of first using people and then liquidating them (two secret police czars shot within a few years), did not purge the young and vigorous marshals (even Georgy Zhukov, the biggest challenge of all, got away with a slap on the wrist - a humiliating low-grade appointment, but still an appointment, not an anonymous grave). So – yes, Stalin did grow into a good commander-

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in-chief - unlike Hitler, his failed nemesis, who took a journey in the opposite direction over the same war.

One could call Roberts' book an inspiring exercise in revisionism – a term well known to the Cold War historians, of course. He emphatically disagrees with the “cold war polemicists” 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.” (p. 373) It is worth noting that this point of view is far from having been limited to the Cold War eon and is often present in media reports from and about Eastern Europe. Despite the horrific war crimes of the Red Army on Polish, German, or Austrian soil (as Roberts informs us, at least 70,000 rapes in Vienna only (p. 263)), Stalin’s troops defeated the most inhumane regime in history, and as for the introduction of Communism to Eastern Europe, the picture was very complicated, as, even in its Stalinist version, Communism had quite a bit of grass-root support in countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Roberts also deplors “the more subtle downgrading” of Stalin by authors who “sidelined the strategic importance of the Soviet-German conflict and reduced its role in the overall narrative of the Second World War.” True -- with all due respect, Iwo Jima was not a Stalingrad.

Stalin's Wars is likely to become popular with instructors teaching courses in 20th century history, as the book covers the most consequential Soviet story – that of World War II and the early, untamed, Cold War, treating the two conflicts as parts of a yet bigger paradigm, which they, likely, were.

The book is smartly organized; pay attention to the fact that the chronology of major events is placed before the body of the text, in a truly user-friendly way, despite the deplorable tradition in publishing of sticking it somewhere between the last page of the index and the dust jacket. The maps, absolutely crucial in a military history book, are numerous, detailed and appropriately easy to read. Another thing making Geoffrey Roberts' book attractive is the appealing voice. Giving the estimates for sexual assaults of the Red Army soldiers on the occupied European territories, Roberts reminds us that Berlin in 1945 “was largely a city of women” (p.263) – a detail that makes war history disturbingly graphic; as it, of course, should be.

So – has the book succeeded in its mission to reconstruct the “commonsense Stalin” as a war leader? Roberts' argument would've been much stronger had he explored Stalin's participation in the Civil War in Russia and the Red Army's 1920 Poland campaign, where Stalin, not exactly a young man, was a young commissar. But, of course, if facts can be verified, the assembly of them, which is, strictly speaking, history proper, is subject to perennial interpretation. It is stunning how looking at the same set of evidence people can pronounce different verdicts on the same situation or person involved. *Stalin's Wars* is very much about that paradox, and that alone is already an accomplishment.

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A Soviet joke from the late 1950s. "What do you think of Stalin's cult of personality?"
"Well, the cult was there for sure, but so was the personality."

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