Stalin’s Wars Roundtable Review
Author’s Response by Geoffrey Roberts

Reviewed Work:  

Roundtable Chair: Warren F. Kimball (moderator)  
Reviewers: Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, Thomas R. Maddux, Constantine Pleshakov, Gerhard L. Weinberg, Vladislav Zubok  
H-Diplo Roundtable Editor: Diane N. Labrosse

Stable URL:  

Your use of this H-Diplo roundtable review indicates your acceptance of the H-Net copyright policies, and terms of condition and use.

The following is a plain language summary of these policies:

You may redistribute and reprint this work under the following conditions:

- **Attribution:** You must include full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.
- **Nonprofit and education purposes only.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- Enquiries about any other uses of this material should be directed to the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

H-Net's copyright policy is available at http://www.h-net.org/about/intellectualproperty.php.

H-Diplo is an international discussion network dedicated to the study of diplomatic and international history (including the history of foreign relations). For more information regarding H-Diplo, please visit http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/.

For further information about our parent organization, H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, please visit http://www.h-net.org/.

Copyright © 2007 by H-Diplo, a part of H-Net. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/  
22 July 2007
It is a great honour and privilege for *Stalin’s Wars* to be reviewed by such a distinguished group of scholars. I would like to thank Diane Labrosse and H-Diplo for organising the roundtable and, especially, Warren Kimball for hosting and chairing the discussion. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to comment on such a range of responses to *Stalin’s Wars*, particularly since the book has proved even more controversial than I imagined. I don’t propose to answer every point raised by the reviewers; rather, I will try to highlight some general issues about my methods and findings. Doubtless I will have the opportunity to deal with outstanding matters as the H-Diplo discussion of the book develops.

The first and most important point to make is that I am not trying to rehabilitate Stalin. I do not believe that Stalin was a great statesman. I think he was criminally responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people. My book is full of evidence - from beginning to end - of the mass repressions of the Stalin era, not least during the war itself. I do think that Stalin was a great war leader (or at least a pretty good one, as Constantine Pleshakov puts it) but this view of Stalin is not an *a priori* thesis. It is the result of my engagement with the evidence on Stalin’s warlordship, particularly the new materials and researches of the last 10-15 years. During the course of my research I came to the conclusion that cold war propaganda and the polemics of destalinisation had contributed to a distortion of our perception of Stalin’s war leadership and that many of the traditional criticisms of his wartime role were either wrong or misconceived. One of my aims is to clear the way for a more balanced critique of Stalin – one that recognises the important strengths as well as the real weaknesses of his wartime leadership. An example of my approach is the critique I make of Stalin’s role in relation to the disaster of 22 June 1941. Unlike Vladislav Zubok and Gerhard Weinberg I do not think that Stalin’s handling of the intelligence warnings of a German surprise attack is the main issue. Sure, Stalin hoped, believed and calculated that Hitler would not attack in summer 1941. But the evidence from multiple intelligence sources (including that from his military intelligence chief, the much-maligned Golikov) was far too compelling for the possibility to be ruled out, even by Stalin. Rather, the salient point is that Stalin believed that even if the Germans did attack Soviet defences would hold and the Red Army would be able to launch its planned counter-offensives. Zubok says that “Stalin did not allow the Soviet military to return fire for hours after Barbarossa started because he did not expect a German attack.” Actually, the Soviet high command, with Stalin’s authorization, issued orders for fire to be returned only a couple of hours after the German attack. Soviet forces were, it is true, constrained from crossing the frontier without special authorization – but this order aimed at pre-empting Nazi propaganda claims that the Red Army had attacked first. More important was that
just a few hours later the Red Army was ordered to implement long-laid plans for counter-offensive action, including deep strikes into enemy territory. It was during the course of this ill-conceived and ill-prepared counter-offensive that the Red Army suffered the most damage in the days following the German attack. It seems to me that it is Stalin’s delusions about Soviet defenses and about the Red Army’s offensive capabilities that should be at the centre of our critical attention, not the intelligence issue. This necessitates the exploration of a more complex scenario in which Stalin is not the only villain of the piece. Alongside Stalin’s miscalculations must be placed the role of his generals, misconceived military doctrine, and the damage done by the Red Army’s preparation and deployment for an offensive war with Germany.

My second point is that the narrative in Stalin’s Wars is, indeed, mainly from Stalin’s point of view, quite often using his voice, either in direct quotation or paraphrase. However, the historical empathy required to tell such a story should not be mistaken for my political views and sympathies. Also, as Thomas Maddux notes, I present the most important evidence of Stalin’s views in a way that facilitates different interpretations from my own. As Zubok says there are alternative interpretations, for example, of Stalin’s statements to Bulgarian and Yugoslav communists in January 1945. In support of my own interpretation I would refer people to the full texts of these statements as printed in the book (p.236) and to my contextualization of them in my extensive analysis of the development of Stalin’s Slavophilism during the war. At the same time I tried to ensure that the point of view of Stalin’s British and American allies was fairly and accurately represented and I just don’t recognise Weinberg’s characterization of the book as “Stalin was always right, and the fault in controversies...was invariably with Britain and the United States.” Again, I think it is a case of Weinberg failing to see that in place of the old critique of Stalin I propose a new one. In telling Stalin’s story I tried to deploy the full range of available sources on what he was thinking and doing, above all the new archives, documents and diaries that reveal what he said in confidential settings. Zubok thinks I give Stalin’s words too much credence and that the Soviet dictator’s love of secrecy means that even his private archive does not reveal his intimate thoughts. I agree – and say so in the book – that evidence of Stalin’s innermost thinking and calculations is limited and problematic and his words are not to be taken at face value. But those words and how they connect to decision, action, and context are the best evidence we have of Stalin’s beliefs and intentions and are certainly preferable to, for example, the tendentious, post hoc, second-hand reconstructions of memoirists. In this connection I am not impressed, for example, by Zubok’s citation from Troyanovsky’s memoirs of what Gromyko supposedly told him about what apparently happened at the famously abrasive meeting between Molotov and Truman in April 1945. Far better, it seems to me, to rely on the documentary evidence of both the Soviet and American contemporary records of the Truman-Molotov conversations. These show that while there was some tough talking between the two men there was nothing like the acerbic exchange recorded in cold war lore (see my article: “Sexing up the Cold War: New Evidence on the
Molotov-Truman Talks of April 1945", \textit{Cold War History}, vol.4, no.3, April 2004).\(^1\) Of course memoirs have their uses, and sometimes they are indispensable. I make a lot of use of them in \textit{Stalin's Wars}, but, I hope, critically, and not as unquestioned authorities of fact or interpretation.

My third point concerns the book’s location in the historical debate about the origins of the cold war. Maddux is right to characterise the book as a text both located in and transcending the revisionist tradition. Indeed, the book’s distant origins date back to the 1970s when as a graduate student at the LSE I formed the intention to write a revisionist history of the Soviet role in the origins of the cold war. To an extent the book represents the fulfillment of that youthful ambition: one of its central narrative strands is the story of how during the war Stalin came to embrace the perspective of a peacetime grand alliance with Britain and the United States – a long-term alliance that would establish a long-term détente that would provide a framework for the tripartite pursuit of common interests – above all the long-term subjugation of Germany and Japan and the avoidance of a new world war. Stalin clung to this perspective for quite some time after the war, notwithstanding clashes and conflicts with the western powers in the early postwar years. Only in mid-1947 – after the launch of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan - did Stalin finally embrace a cold war perspective and completely seal off the Soviet-communist bloc in Eastern Europe from the rest of the continent. Even then, Stalin was so concerned about the negative consequences of the cold war that in the late 1940s and early 1950s he resumed his efforts to seek a détente with the west.

However, the particular analytical theme of my assessment of the Soviet role in the origins of the cold war concerns the critical role played by communist ideology and, in that respect, there is a significant convergence between my views and those of traditionalist and post-traditionalist historians of the cold war. I confess to being bemused, therefore, by Zubok’s observation that “the absence of Stalin’s ideological mind-frame in the book is striking” since I thought I had written a book about Stalin as an ideological actor in which ideology figures as the single most important explanatory variable. True, I see Stalin’s communist ideology as flexible, pragmatic and changing. But again and again in the book – as Maddux observes - I return to ideology to explain his actions. Above all, my argument is that Stalin’s ideological ambitions and perceptions undermined the project of a peacetime grand alliance because he could not acknowledge that the communist challenge in postwar Europe was seen as fundamentally threatening by western politicians. Actually, my overarching interpretation of Stalin’s postwar policy is not that different from the “revolutionary-imperial” paradigm proposed by Pleshakov and Zubok in their well-known book. I prefer, however, the notion of a “revolutionary-patriotic” paradigm because I locate Stalin’s postwar expansionism in a narrative of the patriotic reinvention of Soviet communism and the impact this had on Moscow’s desire for new territories and new


© 2007 H-Diplo
strategic positions – demands that were seen as fair and reasonable rewards for the Soviet Union’s decisive role in winning the anti-fascist war.

My fourth point concerns the theme of missed opportunities. It is my view that the grand alliance could have been maintained after the war and the cold war averted. Standing in the way of this possibility being realised were Stalin’s ideological ambitions and patriotic sensibilities on the one hand and western anti-communism on the other. Of critical importance, too, was the historical background of hostilities in Soviet-Western relations. Maddux is quite right to highlight this omission in the book – surprising given that the first phase of my research on the history of Soviet foreign policy was devoted to the 1930s. But I don’t see these as impassible obstacles. There were opportunities in 1945-1946, even in 1947, for both sides to halt the descent into cold war. In this respect I was impressed by Wilson Miscamble’s recent argument in his From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima and the Cold War that for quite a while after the war Truman and Byrnes continued the Rooseveltian strategy towards the USSR of “containment through integration” (as Gaddis puts it). The difference I have with him is that I think it a pity that the strategy wasn’t pursued more consistently and persistently since my researches on Soviet policy have convinced me that – notwithstanding all the difficulties – it could have eventually borne fruit. The same critical point applies to Stalin and the Soviet side of the equation. Maddux and Zubok both mention the Byrnes Plan for a treaty on the long-term disarmament and demilitarisation of Germany. Zubok says that “the new evidence (not used by Roberts)...reveals that Stalin, as well as his entourage, did not want to withdraw Soviet troops from East Germany under any circumstances.” I am not sure what new evidence he is referring to, but in the book I do summarise the internal Soviet discussion on the Byrnes Plan, as recorded in documents in volume 2 of the Kynin and Laufer’s SSSR i Germanskii Vopros and I have also published an article which deals with this issue in more detail ("Litvinov’s Lost Peace, 1941-1946", Journal of Cold War Studies, vol.4, no2, Spring 2002).² I don’t agree with Zubok’s interpretation of this discussion but the more important point here is that I do see the Byrnes Plan as a significant missed opportunity by the Soviet side – one of many during the early postwar years. In other words, I see Stalin as missing major opportunities to consolidate the grand alliance as well as the west – contrary to perceptions that I blame Britain and the United States for the cold war. But I should have spelled this out more clearly in the book.

But was a long-term Soviet-Western détente possible with a Soviet Union ruled by Stalin? As Caroline Kennedy-Pipe reminds us this is the question posed by Gaddis, who argues that in the end it was not rival ideologies or power conflicts that made the cold war inevitable but Stalinism. She questions, too, the relationship between the nature of Stalin’s domestic polity and the possibilities represented by his foreign policy in its relations with the west. This issue is also broached by Vladimir Pechatnov in his recent book, Stalin, Rusvel’t, Trumen: SSSR i SShA v 1940-kh gg, where he argues that Stalin’s problem was continuing the grand alliance while at the same time safeguarding the Soviet regime from destabilizing

western influences. In the event the problem was resolved by the rapid break up of the grand alliance, which allowed Stalin to retreat into isolation – a position from which he never really emerged, notwithstanding a return to the détente perspective in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The question of whether or not the Stalin regime was politically capable of sustaining a peacetime grand alliance is the greatest challenge posed to my anti-cold war, pro-détente perspective (and it is a theme that will recur in my forthcoming work on Soviet-Western relations in the 1950s). I tackle this problem in a chapter on Stalin's postwar domestic policy, a section of the book which does, as Zubok puts it, push the envelope (but not too far, I hope). My suggestion is that the postwar Stalin regime was transitional and headed for the more benign authoritarian Soviet system of the post-Stalin era. My speculation is that in the absence of the cold war those transitional aspects of post-1945 Stalinism would have become even more pronounced. The historical destiny of the Stalin regime under conditions of postwar détente is anyone's guess but I wouldn't assume that collapse under the impact of western influences was inevitable. Such imagery is heavily influenced post hoc by the fate of Gorbachev's USSR in the 1980s. But conditions in the 1940s (and the 1950s) were very different and we should remember the prolonged Soviet-Western détente of the 1960s and 1970s. While such speculation takes us away from the course of actual historical events it does usefully remind us of the imperative to seek new ways of looking at the past, even if they lead to conclusions that offend conventional opinion.

There are a number of specific points made by the roundtable contributors that I intend to tackle during the course of further discussion but I would like to conclude this commentary by once again thanking them for their reviews of Stalin's Wars.