Stalin’s Wars Roundtable Review
Review by Gerhard L. Weinberg

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In this detailed work covering Stalin’s role in the direction of diplomacy and military affairs in World War II and the Cold War until his death in 1953, Geoffrey Roberts utilized a number of newly accessible unpublished sources as well as considerable published material. Perhaps the most important new source used to shed light on disputed issues is the record of Stalin’s daily appointments, a record that enables the author to set straight assertions in the changing memoirs of Soviet military leaders. The account of Stalin’s developing relationship with the generals of the Red Army is fair and in this reviewer’s opinion the most balanced one currently available. It is also clear that the author’s emphasis on Stalin’s real, not feigned, concern about a revived German threat to the Soviet Union is entirely believable. While Roberts correctly stresses the Soviet interest in gaining a trusteeship over Tripolitania, the western portion of the Italian colony of Libya, he simply omits any reference to Stalin’s demand for a base at the Greek port of Dedeagatch (Alexandroupolis) on the north coast of the Aegean.

This omission of a significant element in Stalin’s expansionist concepts may be related to other strange omissions and errors where geography enters the picture. There is no explanation why Stalin gave Petsamo back to Finland after the Red Army occupied it in the Winter War – but was insistent on annexing it at least from December, 1941, on. The whole extraordinary story of the portion of Lithuania (around Mariampole) that Germany was to have according to the German-Soviet agreement of September 1939, its seizure by the Soviets in 1940, and its purchase from Germany for the sum the United States had paid for Alaska is not mentioned anywhere. Similarly, there is no reference to Stalin’s shift on the future of East Prussia from originally wanting only the city of Tilsit (now Sovietsk) to demanding that the northern half of East Prussia to be annexed to the Russian Federation rather than the Lithuanian SSR, with Poland to be compensated by the German city of Stettin instead of Königsberg. At several places in the text Galicia is retroactively transferred from the Habsburg to the Romanov empire in the pre-World War I era. The fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian uprising might have suggested to the author another look at his assertion that the Carpathian Ukraine had no great strategic importance (p. 224). In fact it provided...
the Soviet Union with a border on Hungary and control of the passes in the Carpathian mountains.

The account of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 offered here has little relation to reality. It seems unfortunate that Roberts is so taken by what he imagines to have been Stalin's brilliance that he never quite grasps the origins, nature, and effects of Stalin's determined refusal to accept superb intelligence on the German plan to invade the Soviet Union in 1941 as well as the direction of Germany's main effort in 1942. There is no recognition of the enormous impact of the German conduct in the East in World War II as contrasted with World War I on cohesion in the Soviet army and civilian population. Roberts never comments on Stalin's inability to comprehend any aspect of the war at sea. Did the Soviet leader seriously expect the Allied ships he had helped the Germans sink to jump up from the bottom of the oceans to carry supplies to the Soviet Union once it had been attacked?

This leads to a fundamental weakness in the book as a whole. Roberts never recognizes that Stalin vastly preferred an alliance with Germany to the one with Britain and the United States that he found himself shoved into by the Germans. The latter could have a base on Soviet territory; the Western Allies could not. The Germans could be provided with an icebreaker so that a German warship could pass north of Siberia into the Pacific to sink Allied ships; but planes of the Western Allied could not be allowed to land on Soviet airfields when supplying the Polish uprising in Warsaw. In this dramatic event as in all others during the war, in the immediate postwar period, and during the Cold War, Stalin was always right, and the fault in controversies then and later was invariably with Britain and the United States. If Stalin was as interested in a continued alignment with the West as the author imagines, why were German prisoners liberated from the Poles in 1939 treated so much better than British and American prisoners liberated from the Germans in 1945? All Soviet attempts at a separate peace with Germany are dismissed by Roberts without serious engagement of the relevant literature. It is, however, only by recognizing that Stalin was projecting his own policy of hoping for such an arrangement onto others that one can explain his almost idiotic obsession with imaginary efforts of Winston Churchill in that direction (pp. 141-42).

The list of dubious assertions and interpretations could be continued. There is something hilarious about Stalin's alleged fear of an invasion eastwards by NATO at a time when all NATO planning, as Soviet espionage knew, was based until well into the 1950's on an evacuation of all forces from the continent in case of a war with a mobilization to follow for a repeat of June 1944 to liberate Western Europe, this time from the Red Army.

Roberts informs his readers in the Preface that Churchill, Hitler, Mussolini, and Roosevelt "were all replaceable as warlords, but not Stalin." This reader wonders whether another leader could have held the British together in their ordeal in 1940, whether another German would have insisted on a conduct of the war guaranteed to make Stalin look benign, whether another Italian would have taken Italy into the war at all, and whether another leader could have prepared the American people for war and then had them accept
a Germany-First strategy when most preferred a Japan-First strategy? And is it not conceivable that another Soviet leader might have refrained from decapitating the Red Army in the years when war loomed and subsequently paid attention to copies of the German invasion plan? Is it really inconceivable that another Soviet leader might have recognized that if the Soviet Union assisted the Germans in driving the Allies from the continent first in the North, then in the West, and finally in the South it would be left alone with them in the East, and that thereafter the same bodies of water that shielded Britain and the United States from German arms would shield Germany from the arms of Britain and the United States? Roberts has provided his readers with some interesting new materials, often quoting important documents at length, but his picture of Stalin as almost invariably wise and correct is not convincing.