

# The Ambiguity of Stalin

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*Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928*

By Stephen Kotkin

(Penguin Press, 2014)

*Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*

By Oleg Khlevniuk, translated by Nora Seligman Favorov

(Yale University Press, 2015)

*The Last Days of Stalin*

By Joshua Rubenstein

(Yale University Press, 2016)

*Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941*

By Stephen Kotkin

(Penguin Press, 2017)

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Joseph Stalin was evil. This statement is no longer terribly controversial, at least among Western historians, as it once was in the last century. The story is very different inside Russia, where an industry has arisen to glorify Stalin and the state that he created, alongside other famously bloody Russian leaders such as Ivan the Terrible. This literature, however, is considered an embarrassment by most serious Russian historians. Even there, as Oleg Khlevniuk writes, “Apologists for Stalin no longer try, as they once did, to deny the crimes of his regime.”

Thankfully the days of prominent Western writers such as Walter Duranty and Jean-Paul Sartre seeking to deny Stalin’s crimes appear long gone. Yet the basic consensus among scholars on the existence of Stalin’s crimes, with debate continuing on their exact scope, has given way to a different discussion: What was the source of Stalin’s evil? Was it to be located within Stalin’s own personality, his paranoia, his lust for power, his legendary suspiciousness?

Some have sought to argue that Stalin’s personality, perhaps deriving from childhood

traumas, is the essence of the story, a personality that remained hidden to some degree from Stalin's comrades until it was too late to stop him. For others, the evil of Stalin is the age-old evil of Russian tyranny and expansionism, a bloody legacy that has been the source of centuries of oppression and threats to both ordinary Russians and Russia's neighbors. For those who see Russia as a continuing menace, who see Putin as a dangerous heir to Stalin's legacy, such a story has obvious temptations. Finally, there are those who locate the evil of Stalin's regime in communist ideology. The centralization of power and the system of terror necessary to impose such an ideology on a country the size of the Soviet Union, the force required to mobilize an entire population to build socialism in such conditions, and the de facto imposition of a permanent state of war with the outside world meant that any such regime, were it to succeed and remain faithful to its purposes, would have had to commit crimes of this magnitude.

While this tripartite typology necessarily simplifies many aspects of the debate, especially as each of the three directions contains several possibilities within it, it is a useful way of clarifying what is at stake in the historiography of Stalin today.

But Joseph Stalin was also extraordinary. The notion of Stalin as a mediocrity par excellence, an unsophisticated, ideologically illiterate, uncharismatic, talentless bureaucrat who rose to the top precisely because he was so unremarkable cannot survive the mountain of documentation that has become available about him and the regime he ran. Far from being ideologically illiterate, the Stalin that emerges from the archives is one with a profound commitment to ideology and a penchant for deep engagement with the ideological impact of cultural production of various sorts. Far from being uncharismatic, accounts of personal meetings with Stalin describe him as having a

captivating charm and wit. Most important, the sheer scope of his task—micromanaging the most powerful state apparatus in the world across a sixth of the earth's land surface, conducting foreign relations on behalf of the world's first communist state in a hostile and unstable political environment, and ultimately repulsing the largest invasion in human history—belies the notion that a mediocrity could have managed it.

Scholars who write about Stalin therefore need to contend with his extraordinary nature, meaning in particular that they have to account to some degree for its origins, describe its specific characteristics, and then integrate that with the story they choose to tell about the constitution of Stalin's evil. If such evil was of a personal kind, how did he manage to accomplish so much, to get so many people to follow him passionately, sacrificing their lives for him? If Stalin's evil was a product of Russian history or communist ideology, could that evil have manifested itself through a different leader? Somehow Stalin cannot be reduced merely to just another Russian autocrat or just another communist dictator. Not for him the "banality of evil."

The problem is that our received narratives about Stalin have been shaped by two people who knew him well and, indeed, whose very careers and identities were set up in opposition to him: Trotsky and Khrushchev. Perhaps no figure in history has had a nemesis as articulate and prolific as Trotsky, the one who labeled Stalin "comrade card-index," an "outstanding mediocrity," and the "grave-digger of the revolution." It was Trotsky more than anyone who kept alive the notion that Stalin was an aberration—a departure from Lenin's true path, a temporary mistake of history—and therefore that the reality of the Soviet Union should not be confused with the revolutionary dreams of communism. The implied counterfactuals were always superior. Many believed Trotsky should have been the true heir. In time, other names would

become more popular: Bukharin, Tito, Mao, Castro, Che, etc. But Trotsky's separation of the revolution from Stalin meant that people had to choose: either recognize Soviet crimes but attribute them to this interloper, or deny the crimes to defend the record of the world's only communist state.

Khrushchev's Secret Speech, therefore, fell on fertile ground. As disorienting and destabilizing as it proved to be in the short run, it was a bet on the notion that the communist revolutionary idea retained enough attraction that, separated from Stalin's bloody legacy, the Soviet Union and its loyalists abroad could experience a rebirth of the Leninist dream. This meant once again quarantining the socialist dream from the Stalinist reality. Stalin had destroyed the heroes of the Party simply because of his own paranoia. While the Soviet people heroically saved the world from fascism, Stalin planned military strategy on a globe.

Yet while Trotsky and Khrushchev sought to bracket Stalin as a departure from the true revolutionary path, in the end the Soviet Union turned out to be more Stalin's creation than anyone else's, a reality that outlived both Khrushchev and his 1980s echo, Mikhail Gorbachev. Though many during the latter stages of the Cold War thought that the Soviet Union could transcend Stalin's legacy, in the end that proved impossible.

As a consequence, looking back on the complete Soviet experience from the vantage point of history, Stalin remains unquestionably the key figure in interpreting the successes and ultimate failure of the Soviet Union. One's verdict on both Stalin's evil and his extraordinary qualities therefore has implications for things like the viability of communism, or perhaps the dangers of Russian nationalism. Given these stakes, especially in the current moment when the Western liberal order centered on capitalism and democracy appears to be in crisis while Russia seems resurgent, what appear to be abstruse

disagreements between scholars about minute details of Stalin's life and career turn out to have immense implications for one's evaluation of the man and the state project he led.

These scholarly debates have been fed by a torrent of material that has been made available in recent years, including Stalin's correspondence and visitor logs from his "private archive," which have enabled the reconstruction of his activities on a daily basis for certain periods, particularly the 1930s. The combination of this wealth of material, the vastness of the existing literature on Stalin, and the import of the subject make attempting to write about Stalin a daunting task, but there are some who have risen to the challenge.

In particular, Stephen Kotkin's monumental biography of Stalin, two volumes of which have been published thus far, covering 1878–1941, is based on decades of breathtaking research. Kotkin's work is an excellent example of employing all this new material in a meticulous, comprehensive way in order to answer the big questions about Stalin laid out in the framework above. His answer, elaborated over roughly two thousand pages so far, essentially comes down to this line in the second volume, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941*: "Without Stalin there would have been no socialism, and without socialism, no Stalin."

His argument is that, on the one hand, there were no realistic alternatives to Stalinism, since producing the Bolshevik version of socialism required the kind of state-enforced collectivization and rushed industrialization that Stalin implemented, and the only question about people like Bukharin and Trotsky was whether they would have had the guts to do it too, not whether they could have found a more gradual, humane path to socialism. (Kotkin seems to suspect that neither Bukharin nor Trotsky could have accomplished what Stalin did.) At the same time, Stalin's crimes did not derive from some

personal pathology or megalomania. They were the product of his true belief in Marxism and his attempts to follow Lenin's path faithfully. In other words, only Stalin could have built socialism, but without socialism Stalin would not have had anything to build.

Oleg Khlevniuk, one of the most accomplished of Stalin scholars, in his well-informed and wonderfully readable *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, affirms the importance of ideology in Stalin's regime while allowing more leeway for the particular way that Stalin's personality translated that ideology into policy. Khlevniuk writes that "Ideological doctrines and prejudices were often decisive in Stalin's life and actions, but instead of receiving them passively, he adapted them to the interests of his own dictatorship and emerging superpower. . . . Of all available methods for resolving political, social, and economic conflict, he favored terror and saw no reason to moderate its use."

Khlevniuk agrees with Kotkin that Stalin indeed exercised an extraordinary amount of control over such a vast empire and state apparatus. Arguing against those who would try to defend Stalin by asserting that he was unaware of bureaucratic excesses, he states: "We do not know of a single decision of major consequence taken by anyone other than Stalin. We do not know of even a brief period when he did not exercise dictatorial control." Similarly, Khlevniuk, like Kotkin, points to Stalin's deep engagement with the ideological content of cultural products as evidence for the centrality and pervasiveness of ideology in Stalin's exercise of power.

Yet there are instances in which Khlevniuk's reading of the historical record diverges from Kotkin's, revealing more of a willingness to see some of the evil as attributable to Stalin's personality. In his first volume, Kotkin spends a significant amount of time proving that Lenin's so-called "Testament," which called for the removal of Stalin as general secretary, was actually forged. One

implication of this conclusion is to weaken the claim that Stalin was a departure from Lenin, rather than being a faithful disciple of the master. Khlevniuk, however, strongly disagrees with the notion that the "Testament" was forged, asserting that Lenin did, in fact, take steps against Stalin at the end of his life. Nevertheless, Khlevniuk does not necessarily take this to mean that Lenin had definitively rejected Stalin in favor of Trotsky, Bukharin, or someone else. Khlevniuk argues that it was largely a matter of timing—Stalin's sins came just as Lenin was dying, though they were not worse than those committed by other leading Bolsheviks. Perhaps, then, Stalin's comrades could have acted on Lenin's words, but they did not necessarily betray Leninism by failing to act on them.

A more definitive site of disagreement between Kotkin and Khlevniuk concerns the 1931–1933 famine. For some recent authors, such as Anne Applebaum and Tim Snyder, the famine is the ultimate proof of Stalin's Russian nationalism, a genocide purposely committed against the Ukrainian nation. Kotkin takes a very different approach, demonstrating not only that the famine was USSR-wide, rather than particularly directed against the Ukrainians, but that furthermore Stalin did not purposely try to increase its severity. According to Kotkin, while Stalin was certainly callous in his treatment of the peasantry, there was reason to believe that he did try to alleviate peasant hunger to a degree as it became known to him. He writes that "the famine was not intentional" and that Stalin's actions "do not indicate that he was trying to exterminate peasants or ethnic Ukrainians." The famine, therefore, was an unintended consequence of collectivization, which in turn was a necessary part of the socialist project.

Khlevniuk's interpretation lies somewhere in the middle. While he does not believe that Ukrainians were targeted with the goal of

genocide, he does think that Ukraine, along with the North Caucasus, was seen by Stalin as an area of harsh peasant resistance. Furthermore, he thinks that “the looming crisis was obvious to everyone, including Stalin, long before the famine entered its most critical phase,” which would seem to conflict with the idea that it could have been unintentional except in a most literal sense. There is room in Khlevniuk’s account, perhaps, for collectivization with fewer casualties, had the leader been more inclined to help.

With regard to the Purges, however, Khlevniuk rejects the theory floated by many that Stalin staged the murder of Leningrad Party leader Sergey Kirov in 1934 as a pretext for a massacre of the Party elite. The orgy of state killing that ultimately derived from the Kirov investigation unquestionably owed much to Stalin’s paranoia, but for both Khlevniuk and Kotkin, the picture of Stalin cynically plotting his enemies’ demise on the basis of a complete fabrication is a bridge too far. That would seem to put too much blame on Stalin and too little on the system around him.

Joshua Rubenstein’s excellent book *The Last Days of Stalin* offers an interesting perspective on this question of Stalin’s role in the Soviet regime by foregrounding the reaction of Stalin’s contemporaries to his demise. What did the people who knew Stalin, met with Stalin, and covered Stalin think about him—and what did they think would happen to the Soviet Union once he was gone? The sources that Rubenstein has dug up will likely disappoint those who would like to imagine that the world saw Stalin as uniquely evil and breathed a sigh of relief when he died.

Rather, as Rubenstein shows, President Eisenhower; his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles; and his vice president, Richard Nixon, initially believed that “the situation might very well be worse after Stalin’s death.” Former president Truman called

Stalin “a decent fellow” who was “a prisoner of the Politburo. He can’t do what he wants.” The *New York Times*’s obituary ignored Stalin’s crimes, saying he “took and kept power in his country through a mixture of character, guile, and luck,” while *The Times* of London wrote about both Lenin and Stalin that “rarely have two successive rulers of a great country responded so absolutely to its changing need and piloted it so successfully through periods of crisis.”

These misperceptions of the nature of Stalin’s role in the Soviet regime had real consequences for Western policy in the wake of his death. The Eisenhower administration was not ready for a major shift in Soviet policy after Stalin’s death, and consequently failed either to make progress diplomatically with the new Soviet leaders or to adapt its approach to the Soviet Union more broadly. Western observers were similarly at a loss about how to understand the arrest and execution of Stalin’s police chief, Lavrenty Beria. Rubenstein writes that British officials “assumed... that there had been a struggle between one group that wanted to liberalize the Soviet regime and another that wished to continue the stringent Stalinist policy. But the commentators did not agree on which group was which.”

While Rubenstein acknowledges that it would be unfair to judge contemporaries by the standards of scholars with access to archival materials, it would nevertheless appear difficult to attribute all these misperceptions solely to lack of information. After all, while they may not have had archival materials, they did have other sources of information, including intelligence reports and personal interactions. One could read Rubenstein’s story as evidence that even Stalin’s contemporaries were mystified by his role in such a vast and bloody enterprise, and were equally unsure how much to attribute to communism, Russian expansionism, or a bloodthirsty, power-hungry dictator.

As the corpus of scholarly literature on Stalin grows, on top of a vast and expanding documentary basis, one cannot help but wonder whether we will be any better at settling these debates and drawing definitive conclusions than were our predecessors. Today as before, many of the debates about Stalin that appear to be factual on the surface are in fact deeply ideological, and as a consequence may not be amenable to resolution via archival discoveries. As disappointing as the idea might be that we may never settle academic debates about Stalin,

or Trotsky, or Bukharin, or about a possible Ukrainian genocide, the stakes of these debates, as Rubenstein's work shows, might be even higher. Perhaps the most important question to answer about Stalin is this: Will we see his like again, and more important, will we know it when we see it?

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## Where We Are

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Frederick Turner

Where is home, if it is not with you  
In whatever dark land where we wander?  
Where the alien hills we travel through  
Faintly echo with a distant thunder;  
Where the ghost of some odd friend we knew  
Shows up on a half-deserted street,  
Waves, but has another thing to do  
In this pleasant country of defeat.

Where we are, though, always was the center,  
Where your index points from, as does mine,  
And whatever strangerhood we enter  
Now, deictic, changes to a sign  
We were never strangers, always here,  
Even in this December of the year.