Books May 2015

Young Stalin’s mortal roulette
by Conrad Black

A review of Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928 by Stephen Kotkin

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Stephen Kotkin
Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928
Penguin Press, 976 pages, $40.00
Stalin is a formidably documented, densely detailed book of 739 pages that gets the reader from Stalin’s birth in 1878 up to 1928, just six years into his thirty-one-year tenure as general secretary of the Communist Party of Russia and then the Soviet Union. Two more volumes are promised, which makes the author, Stephen Kotkin, a candidate for the status of the Robert Caro of English-
language Russian political biographies. It is a laborious read, because of detail and a slightly cavalier approach by Mr. Kotkin to avoiding even elemental simplifications in presenting Stalin’s tortuous, completely devious nature and the unrelievedly treacherous atmosphere of a revolutionary life, when dodging and agitating no less than when exercising practically unlimited power. But these are small cavils with a work that is very hard to put down, very convincing in the rigor and fairness of its judgments, and brilliant at conveying the vast sweep of the events of the late Romanov era, the Great War, the 1917 Russian Revolutions, and the febrile plotting and back-stabbing that led to apparently natural but premature deaths (Lenin, Sverdlov, Frunze, and Dzierzinski) or violent deaths of almost all the players except Stalin and a few of his most assiduous disciples (Molotov, Kaganovich, Mikoyan, Voroshilov, and Kalinin). It was a deadly game every day for at least the last three decades of this volume; one false step was often a mortal error, and a false step could only become so because of a subsequent capricious, sadistic, completely unforeseeable change of course by Stalin. And though Stalin played a brilliant hand at his terrible game of terror, conspiracy, revolution, war, and maximum-risk policies generally, he came close to disaster many times. His survival in absolute power until his natural death at a full age (seventy-four)—despite the deadly stakes and compromised health since his peasant youth and countless Siberian penal confinements—confers on him the status of one of the giants, and one of the monsters, of world history.
Because of his Georgian accent, his lack of a strong voice due to pulmonary and other health problems in his youth and young manhood, and his furtive nature, Stalin perfected techniques of self-promotion based on his strong suits: guile, thoroughness, cynicism, acute insight into the foibles and weaknesses of others, complete absence of human attachments, immense charm, and quiet and quickly formulated persuasiveness that didn’t play well with huge audiences, but won him almost every round at Politburo and Central Committee meetings. Though Lenin and Leon Trotsky, (Stalin’s great rival until he deposed, expelled, and ultimately assassinated him) were hypnotic public speakers, Lenin, despite being a brilliant and decisive strategist, was slightly disorganized, and his physical stamina gave way completely at the age of fifty-one; Trotsky had no political judgment and was an indifferent administrator. These facts have often been written before, but, apart from Simon Sebag Montefiore in his volumes on how Stalin maneuvered in the Kremlin inner circle, no one has assimilated the vast quantity of material released in the post-Communist era as Kotkin has, and no one has applied it, as he has, to the full range of Stalin’s activities from his earliest days. The volumes covering the most important decades, in national and world terms, of Stalin’s career as the Soviet Union’s absolute ruler promise to be a major contribution to the Stalin literature. (So prodigious is the detail that it emerges that Stalin’s chef at his country dacha outside Moscow was Vladimir Putin’s grandfather.) Stylistically, it is a bit labored in places, and there are scores of sentences that begin “True,” without having stated what it was whose exception was about to be announced. There is also over-frequent recourse to the slightly twee “Be that as it may,” but, for this reader at least, these punctuations became almost endearing and somehow made it all seem more Russian.

Despite its scholastic rigor and thoroughness, this account necessarily leaves us wondering at Stalin’s motives, between complete cynicism and ruthless pursuit and retention of absolute power, and Marxist convictions. Kotkin believes that Stalin was a convinced Marxist and only varied from that conviction for tactical reasons in face of necessity for his own survival. That may be correct, and I have no standing to take issue with such a knowledgeable authority, but I don’t think it is clear that Stalin really was an unflinching Marxist, especially as he was an unlimited cynic, a very well-read and well-informed—and in all respects extremely intelligent and perceptive—man, and Marxism was clearly, by the latter years covered in this book, nonsense as a political and economic system. I hesitantly suggest that Stalin swaddled himself in Marxist orthodoxy more often to wrong-foot his opponents and exploit the confected and amplified sacred reverence for Lenin and Marx as a method of faulting and destroying rivals than because he thought it was the best course—or even cared whether it was—as long as mistakes did not compromise his hold on power and the Soviet Union’s place in the world.

This volume ends as Stalin completes his rout of Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev and prepares to evict Rykov, Tomsky, and Bukharin, that is to say, all who had been his colleagues in the Politburo when Lenin, who had been severely invalided for three years, died in 1924. Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev tormented Stalin with the “Testament” of Lenin (so dubbed by Trotsky), which was
probably forged by Lenin’s wife, Krupskaya. In the purported “Testament,” Lenin sought Stalin’s removal as party general secretary, alleging Stalin’s “rudeness” as well as his lust for power—both legitimate complaints. Stalin countered with claims of fraud, reminders that Kamenev and Zinoviev had opposed the October Revolution, and that all had opposed the New Economic Policy in 1921, which saved the Revolution by proclaiming “socialism in one country” and accepting private, rather than collective, agriculture. Stalin staged several resignations as general secretary, in the assurance that the Politburo and Central Committee majorities would reject them.

In the next volume, we will read (doubtless in implacable detail) of the execution or outright murder (Trotsky) or suicide (Tomsky) of all of these old comrades. And it ends as Stalin, who had smeared Trotsky for opposing Lenin’s NEP deferral of collectivization of agriculture, prepares to collectivize agriculture by force with disastrous results. These included the deaths of five to seven million people from hunger and exposure imposed on them by the regime, as well as outright massacres of recalcitrant farmers, chronic hunger inflicted on forty million people, and the loss of millions of tons of grain and the majority of the entire Soviet population of livestock, sheep, horses, pigs, and goats. What he liquidated his rivals for proposing, he effected himself as soon as he had won that deadly contest. Kotkin thinks Stalin followed the correct course of dogmatic Marxism–Leninism as soon as he was able politically to do so. I am not so sure that there wasn’t an element of showing that his power was so absolute that he could murder millions of innocents in a dubious cause and was so free of the constraints that bound everyone else except the most absolute autocrats in Russia’s tumultuous history, precisely by adopting the policy of those whom he had judicially murdered for advocating just that policy. How better to impart the lesson of his absolute dictatorship?

One of the many strengths of this account is the way it conveys the relentlessly murderous atmosphere. Those who schemed against the Romanovs were taking their lives in their hands every day; the leaders of the Revolution were constantly being accused of “treason” (Lenin’s preferred formulation for dogmatic or policy differences), of being “anti-party,” “counter-revolutionary,” or agents of the bourgeois and capitalist imperialists. The penalty for all these offenses, which were constantly being bandied about, was death. Once his agricultural collectivization program was cranked up, Stalin promulgated police powers to execute people preemptively and without trial if the local leaders of the secret police judged individuals capable of infractions.

Another strength is the clarity the author brings to the engineering of Stalin’s totalitarianism. He was a successful commissar of nationalities in the early years of the Revolution and installed loyalists in many of the fringes of the country. Once installed as general secretary, Stalin directly controlled the media and the secret police: he wrote a great deal in the press and read everything from the ubiquitous police. Where the Communist Party dominated the cadres of the state and the armed forces, the secret police (OGPU, forerunner of the NKVD and KGB) infiltrated the Party and monitored everyone; they reported directly to Stalin on all aspects of local opinion and official
performance throughout the country. Almost any perceived deviation from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy (or past deviation from Lenin’s instructions, even if the deviations had not really occurred, or if they had and Lenin was not much concerned with them) was grounds for the stages of one’s fall, and there were thousands who replicated this sequence: dismissal from office, removal from committees, expulsion as a Party member, indictment for treason, torture until fraudulent public confessions were made to spare one’s family and get it over with, execution, and finally suppression from photographs, official history, and living memory. And the desire to placate and impress Stalin was so great and self-interested that there were always volunteers to lead the indictment of others, allowing Stalin to play the reluctant and equable father of the nation above this distressing fray and to indulge the next wave of accusers, as they, on a nod from the general secretary (Stalin was also the premier for his last twenty-two years), accused the previous accusers, and sent them too to receive a bullet in their heads in the basement of the Lubianka (OGPU headquarters). Successive police ministers, on being toppled, charged, tortured, and executed, handed on to their successors the spent bullets “K” and “Z” that were discharged into the heads of Kamenev and Zinoviev. A capricious totalitarian cultivated a culture of mortal roulette and sudden, terrible destruction.

Kotkin’s first volume vividly recreates the surreal and paranoiac ambiance of the early and middle revolutionary government. Not only were all dissenters tarred with the brush of being monarchist revanchists, imperialist capitalist tools, or crooks (or some or all of these), but the Bolshevik government sought sophisticated machinery, agricultural equipment, motor vehicles, and machine tools from the West, and proposed to pay for them on credit secured by access to Russian markets and receipt of Russian grain and oil. But, without much recognition of the incongruity of it, all the while the Russian government was trying to foment worker-revolt in these countries. Stalin gave cash and propaganda assistance to the miners and other participants in the British General Strike of 1926; constantly, if ineffectually, promoted the American Communist party; encouraged extreme labor activity in France; and actively and directly promoted unsuccessful armed uprisings in Germany and China. This was a new but unsuccessful application on a grand scale of Lenin’s famous dictum that “the capitalists are so stupid, they will sell us the rope we hang them with.” Kotkin well makes the point that the Great Depression saved the Soviet Union. The West was suddenly desperate for sales of industrial goods and, ending its principled boycott of the Bolshevik state, sold all the industrial machinery it could to the USSR, whatever its revolutionary agitations, on the easiest terms. This greatly facilitated the modernization of the physical plant of Soviet heavy industry and contributed importantly to that country’s survival of the Second World War, as we will see in the next volume. Britain restored diplomatic relations with the Kremlin, broken after the 1926 General Strike; Germany sent back an ambassador after a lapse of several years, and even the United States exchanged ambassadors with the Kremlin in 1933, though little practical good came of it until international relations heated up six years later. The Great Depression was not seen as the lucky break for the Soviet Union that it was, but rather as the confirmation of the death spiral of capitalism and the legitimization of everything Lenin and Stalin had done, even though Russia’s economic
progress through the 1920s had lagged far beyond that of all other major powers, including Japan and Mussolini’s Italy.

Kotkin’s summary of the subject of this somewhat turgid but magisterial work is:

Closed and gregarious, vindictive and solicitous, Stalin shatters any attempt to confine him within binaries. He was a despot who, when he wanted to be, was utterly charming. He was an ideologue who was flexibly pragmatic. He fastened obsessively on slights yet he was a precocious geostrategic thinker—unique among Bolsheviks—who was, however, prone to egregious strategic blunders. Stalin was a ruler both astute and blinkered, diligent and self-defeating, cynical and true-believing. The cold calculation and the flights of absurd delusion were products of a single mind. He was shrewd enough to see right through people, but not enough to escape a litany of nonsensical beliefs. Above all, he became ever more steeped in conspiracies. But Stalin’s hyper-suspiciousness...closely mirrored the Bolshevik Revolution’s in-built structural paranoia, the predicament of a Communist regime in an overwhelmingly capitalist world, surrounded by, penetrated by, enemies, [as] the Bolsheviks unwittingly yet relentlessly reproduced the pathologies and predations of the old regime. . . . He was a leader; he made history, rearranging the entire socioeconomic landscape of one sixth of the earth. Right through mass rebellion, mass starvation, cannibalism, the destruction of the country’s livestock, and unprecedented political destabilization, Stalin did not flinch. Feints in the form of tactical retreats notwithstanding, he would keep going even when warned to his face in the inner regime that a catastrophe was unfolding. . . . This required extraordinary maneuvering, browbeating, and violence on his part. It also required deep conviction that it had to be done. Stalin was uncommonly skillful in building an awesome personal dictatorship, but also a bungler, getting fascism wrong, stumbling in foreign policy. But he had will. . . . History, for better and for worse, is made by those who never give up.

This is, on balance, a very good book and I am looking forward to its sequels.


Conrad Black is the former publisher of the London Telegraph newspapers and The Spectator.