

A review of Stephen Kotkin's *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928*

Part 1

By Fred Williams
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In November 2014, Penguin Press released the first volume of a projected three-volume biography, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928*, by Princeton University professor Stephen Kotkin. Many initial reviews have heaped praise on this deeply flawed work. It was even a finalist this year for the Pulitzer Prize for biography. Far from contributing to an understanding of the first 50 years of Stalin's life, however, Kotkin has produced a bloated and poorly written work, recycling many of the anti-communist or Stalinist lies of the Cold War, and adding some of his own. He has thereby contributed to ongoing attempts since 1991 to falsify Soviet history and create a new, thoroughly reactionary, narrative.

The subject that Kotkin tackles is a complex and demanding one. Many authors have tried to unravel the Stalin enigma, and Kotkin's book joins an already crowded field. Indeed, there has been an astounding proliferation of biographies about Stalin in recent years. Among the more than 3,000 texts published in many languages, over 2,200 biographies have appeared in various editions since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Biographies in English (over 1,000) outnumber those in all other languages, with Russian not far behind. The periodical literature has also been vast. An annotated bibliography published in 2007 lists 1,700 articles appearing by 2005 in English alone.

This enormous number of books and articles reflects the undying fascination with and perplexity over Stalin's life. In the early 1920s, this relatively unknown Bolshevik seemed to come out of nowhere to assume ever increasing political power. He eventually ousted rivals who were undoubtedly more popular, capable and principled than he. Twenty years after the revolution, he unleashed the Great Terror, which eliminated the vast majority of those who had led the October Revolution; among his victims, Stalin imprisoned, tortured and executed people who had been his party comrades in the pre-revolutionary and early Soviet periods.

Despite colossal political blunders—misreading economic development in the Soviet Union; advocating policies that led to colossal defeats in Britain, China, Germany, Spain and elsewhere; conducting a reckless collectivization campaign that produced a devastating famine in 1932-33; beheading the Red Army by killing more than 40,000 officers on the eve of the approaching Second World War; disorienting the entire workers' movement by concluding the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939—Stalin remained in power until his death in 1953. During his reign, the Soviet people made enormous sacrifices: 27 million perished in defeating Hitler alone. After almost 25 years of nearly absolute rule, Stalin left the Soviet Union crippled, and it never recovered from the catastrophic consequences—economically, politically, and culturally—of his policies.

The extraordinary career of this dictator poses many complex problems. How did such a man come to power? How did power affect him? And how did he become, as Trotsky said, “the grave-digger of the revolution”?

When Trotsky addressed these questions in his unfinished biography of Stalin, he was able to place Stalin's role within a theoretically informed narrative of the October Revolution. He was able to identify and explain the social basis of Stalin's power: the growing Soviet bureaucracy that came to dominate the party and state apparatus.

Kotkin, by contrast, lacks a theoretically sound conception of the October Revolution and the complexities of the early Soviet regime. Here Kotkin's own political views intrude far too often as he displays an unrestrained subjectivism in approaching his subject. Throughout the book, he mocks Marx, Lenin and especially Trotsky. He is determined, however, to anoint Stalin as a consistent Marxist and the true disciple of Lenin.

This is not the first time that Kotkin has argued that Marxism reaches its highest incarnation in the person of Stalin. In his only other major work, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (1995), Kotkin elevates Stalin (and Stalinism) to nothing less than the culmination of the Enlightenment!

In his new book, as Kotkin traces Stalin's ascension to power, he often seems baffled by the “paradoxes” of his subject, whether dealing with broader geopolitical issues leading up to the October Revolution and its aftermath, or with the personal characteristics of Stalin himself. By the time Kotkin is finished with this first volume, the Stalin that he produces is an “uncanny fusion of zealous Marxist convictions and great-power sensibilities, of sociopathic tendencies and exceptional diligence and resolve” [xi]. He is also “thin-skinned, two-faced, a nasty provocateur” [513]; he was “desperately making up spurious arguments, and showed himself to be thin-skinned, an intellectual bully” [524]; he “emerged a victor with a grudge, roiling with self-pity, resentment, victimhood” [591]. “Stalin's malevolence was palpable” [719]; and lastly, Kotkin highlights “Stalin's extreme vindictiveness” [723]. Perhaps to balance what threatens to become an overly negative portrayal of his paradoxical hero, Kotkin hastens to add that “he could also switch on the charm, and he proved to be a loyal patron to those ‘under his wing’” [465].

Kotkin is convinced that Stalin's intellectual powers have been profoundly underestimated by most biographers. Yet his evidence often undermines his thesis. While repeatedly trying to prove that Stalin was a major Marxist theoretician, Kotkin writes: “Few knew that he had plagiarized whole cloth his ‘Anarchism or Socialism?’ (1906-7) from the deceased Giorgi Teliya. Now, for his ‘Foundations of Leninism,’ he plagiarized *Lenin's Doctrine of Revolution*, a manuscript by the still-living Filipp Ksenofontov” [544]. Unlike other leading Marxists, who spent much of World War I analyzing the causes behind the collapse of the Second International and the outbreak of the first imperialist war, “the future arbiter of all thought left no wartime thoughts whatsoever, not even a diary” [153]. Years later, “Stalin's inability to understand fascism

was sorely evident” [550]. And yet, Kotkin makes the absurd claim that “Stalin defeated Trotsky on the plane where the Georgian was perceived as most vulnerable yet proved strong—ideology” [591]. Here Kotkin elevates Stalin’s theory of building socialism in one country to the summits of human thought. Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, which accurately outlined the moving forces of the Russian Revolutions (of 1905 and 1917) and embodied the internationalism of both Lenin and Trotsky, is passed over in silence. Many historians have amply demonstrated that Stalin’s reactionary nationalist perspective is incompatible with Marxism, but Kotkin blithely dismisses them all.

Ultimately, Kotkin’s proof of Stalin’s Marxism is based on the repetition of unsubstantiated phrases: “Stalin’s immersion in Marxism” [427]; “Stalin returned again and again to the touchstone of Lenin’s writings. The fundamental fact about him was that he viewed the world through Marxism” [462]; “What is clear is that he was marinated in Communist ideology” [470]; “As Lenin’s would-be faithful pupil, Stalin emerged in 1924–25 as both an ideologue (‘capital,’ ‘the bourgeoisie,’ ‘imperialism’) and an embryonic geostrategic thinker” [532]. In this regard, Kotkin reveals his great displeasure with one of the most authoritative historians of the Soviet Union, E.H. Carr: “Carr, for example, wrongly called Stalin’s Marxism merely ‘skin deep’” [855]. Despite his best efforts, Kotkin does little to refute Carr’s assessment.

Before turning to some of the many instances of outright historical falsification in Kotkin’s book, a few comments must be made about the book’s structure, the use (or misuse) of source material and the author’s writing style.

Structure, Sources and Style

Of the book’s 950 pages, the main text covers 739 pages and the notes 122 pages. The bibliography is 52 pages long, and there is a fairly comprehensive 35-page index. In a public lecture last fall, Kotkin said that he has been working on the first two volumes for 11 years, plowing through a vast amount of new archival material and original documentation, much of which he borrowed from other published works. Indeed, there are about 4,000 endnotes set in irritatingly small type at the back of this first volume. The sheer number of notes has led many reviewers to praise Kotkin’s “prodigious research” [Serge Schmemmann in the *New York Times*], “astounding feat of historical research” [Jay Elwes in *Prospect Magazine*], “enormous cast of historical figures” [Edward Wilson in the *Independent*], and “vast body of evidence, published and archival, that he has consulted” [Martin Miller].

These reviewers should have been more guarded in their enthusiasm. If one begins the arduous task of checking Kotkin’s notes, it quickly emerges that an astonishing number of them contain errors, false interpretations and unfounded assertions. Far too often, Kotkin gets dates wrong, volumes wrong and cites incorrect page numbers. At a certain point, this reviewer had to give up counting questionable citations. There is much extraneous material that should have been cut: after Kotkin describes the 1923 “cave meeting” of Zinoviev, Bukharin and others in Kislovodsk, does the reader really have to learn that “The Harvard historian of Russia Richard Pipes happened to be born in Poland the day after the cave meeting (July 11)” [note 204, p. 827]? In addition, typographical errors abound, as do mistakes in transliteration, which is unusual for a respected publishing house (Penguin Press). One gets the feeling that this book was hastily rushed into print, for no obvious reason. Such sloppiness, coupled with Kotkin’s blatantly tendentious approach to his subject matter, suggests a political rather than a scholarly agenda.

In a rare moment of candor, Kotkin seems to acknowledge that he was overwhelmed by the material: “This book is ... based upon exhaustive study of scans as well as microfilms of archival material and published primary source documents, which for the Stalin era have proliferated almost beyond a single individual’s capacity to work through them” [xii].

Given that the bibliography contains about 3,000 books and articles, this reviewer concludes that Kotkin indeed lacked the capacity to work through them and faithfully assimilate their content. In some cases his failings are obvious: despite listing 35 entries for works by Trotsky, Kotkin rarely cites any significant passage from Trotsky’s writings and shows little or no knowledge of Trotsky’s actual views. And even the bibliographical entries themselves contain errors: Kotkin lists 21 volumes of Trotsky’s *Sochineniia* [Works] published in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. In fact, 12 volumes were issued in 15 books before Stalin halted the entire project in 1927. It is highly doubtful that Kotkin has read even a fraction of the pages in Trotsky’s writings listed in the bibliography. He certainly does not show that he has comprehended them.

The situation is not much better with the hefty volumes of documents published from the previously closed Soviet archives over the last 20 years. Kotkin readily borrows from Viktor Danilov’s five-volume *Tragediia sovetskoi derevni* [Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside], especially the first volume [May 1927–November 1929, 880 pages]. He also refers to the five-volume *Kak lomali NEP* [How the NEP Was Destroyed. Stenographic Records of the VCP(b) Central Committee Plenums, 1928–1929], each volume of which contains 500–700 pages of material. In the ten pages he devotes to the Shakhty Trial of 1928, he can draw on the two-volume *Shakhtinskii protsess 1928 g.* [1,088 and 976 pages]. Kotkin occasionally dips into the ten-volume series, “*Sovershenno-sekretno*”: *Lubianka-Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922–1934)* [“Top Secret”: *Lubianka to Stalin on the State of the Nation (1922–1934)*]. Lastly, there is the volume containing A. M. Plekhanov’s 527-page commentary on 134 documents in *VChK-OGPU v gody novoi ekonomicheskoi politiki 1921–1928* [The VeCheKa and OGPU in the Years of the New Economic Policy 1921–1929]. For a scrupulous historian, these volumes contain an embarrassment of riches. For a historian selecting archival material to fit a preconceived narrative, there is the danger of tearing passages out of context and misusing them, sometimes called “cherry-picking.” Kotkin is unfortunately guilty of this latter practice, as we will show below. But first a few more words on sources.

This is a highly derivative work, depending on several key books. As Kotkin himself acknowledges: “It is hard to imagine what Part I of this volume would look like without its reliance on the scrupulous work of Aleksandr Ostrovskii concerning the young Stalin” [Kto stoial za spinoi Stalina [Who Stood Behind Stalin’s Back] — F.W.] [xii]. In descending order, the most frequently cited historians are: Dmitry Volkogonov (Russian author of perestroika-era biographies of Stalin, Lenin and Trotsky); E.H. Carr (whom Kotkin often tries to rebuke, calling him at one point “Utterly, eternally wrong” [739]); Valentin Sakharov (an arch-Stalinist historian at Moscow University, without whom many of Kotkin’s arguments would collapse); the right-wing Harvard professor Richard Pipes (whom Kotkin treats with near reverence); Isaac Deutscher (author of major biographies of both Trotsky and Stalin, whom Kotkin grudgingly quotes); Robert Tucker (Kotkin’s earlier mentor at Princeton, whose psycho-history of Stalin he often questions); the afore-mentioned Ostrovskii; Simon Sebag Montefiore (a journalist/historian whose *Young Stalin*, even Kotkin admits, “reads like a novel” [741]); Alexander Rabinowitch (subject of Kotkin’s petulance: “Incredibly, Rabinowitch (again) argues that dictatorship was forced upon Lenin and the Bolsheviks” [note 4, p. 804]); and many others.

Significantly there are major historians who are either rarely mentioned or completely ignored. Moshe Lewin authored two unparalleled studies, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power*, and *Lenin’s Last Struggle*, but there are only 21 references to his works. With the second book, the reason is obvious: Lewin’s book demolishes the arguments put forward by Valentin Sakharov in his “*Politicheskoe zaveshchanie*” *Lenina* [Lenin’s “Political Testament”], where the Moscow professor claims that several

of Lenin's last dictations, letters and articles were forgeries. Kotkin whole-heartedly embraces this theory as he attempts to prove that Lenin simply could not have allied with Trotsky against Stalin in the last months of his political life.

Given Kotkin's full acceptance of Sakharov's unabashedly pro-Stalinist work, it is at first unclear why he omits any reference to the major two-volume *Politicheskaia biografiiia Stalina* [*Political Biography of Stalin*, 2004] by N. I. Kapchenko. Despite Kapchenko's favorable treatment of Stalin and relatively critical treatment of Trotsky, however, he states unequivocally: "Without going into details and nuances, I will note that the documents scholars have at their disposal and the testimony of an enormous number of people give not the slightest grounds for questioning the irrefutable fact of the existence of Lenin's political testimony" [638]. There will be more to say about this topic later.

The most glaring omission in Kotkin's book is that he totally ignores Vadim Rogovin's seven-volume series, *Was There an Alternative [to Stalinism]?* (1991-2002). In his unsurpassed study, Rogovin set himself the task of meticulously reconstructing the issues and struggles within the Bolshevik Party from 1923 to 1940. He demonstrates that there was substantial opposition to the emerging Stalinist regime at every point. Whatever Kotkin's political viewpoint, if he were a conscientious historian he would be compelled to refer to this seminal work on the early Soviet period and demonstrate where he believes Rogovin's assessment misses the mark. To just ignore him is unacceptable from the standpoint of serious historical research and suggests once again that Kotkin has a political and ideological agenda rather than a scholarly one. Kotkin cannot argue that he is unaware of the existence of Rogovin's writings: he frequently cites Donald Rayfield's *Stalin's Hangmen* (2004). In the bibliography to his work, Rayfield prominently marks four out of six volumes listed by Rogovin as "Sources to which I am heavily indebted" [495-496].

The last source rarely mentioned is Stephen Cohen's 1973 biography of Bukharin. Why Kotkin only refers to his former Princeton colleague's work six times is somewhat of a mystery. Does a comparison of Stalin to Bukharin diminish the former? Since Bukharin played a significant role, both as an ally and then as an opponent of Stalin, one would expect a more serious treatment of this important figure in Kotkin's book.

To be continued

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