

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

Part 3

By Fred Williams
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This is part three of a four-part review of Stephen Kotkin's Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928. Part one was published on June 1 and part two on June 2.

Stalin versus Trotsky

As stated earlier, Kotkin elevates Stalin above Trotsky throughout the book. Often, this requires considerable sleight of hand. It is well known, for instance, that in 1905 Trotsky was elected chairman of the Petersburg Soviet not long before the members of the Soviet were arrested by the tsarist regime. Trotsky not only played a leading role in the capital's revolutionary council during the Revolution of 1905, but as he awaited trial in December and early January, he began writing an analysis of the revolution that later turned into the book *Our Revolution*. A significant portion of the book was published as *Results and Prospects*, not only before 1917, but reprinted in 1919, after the successful revolution of October 1917. It is here that Trotsky clearly outlined his concept of permanent revolution, demonstrating that the working class, supported by the peasantry in the countryside, could establish a dictatorship in Russia as the initial step in the socialist revolution that would have to extend into the more advanced countries of Europe if the first workers' state were to survive.

In stark contrast, Stalin's role in 1905 was not very well known. When Trotsky was writing a biography of Stalin in 1939-1940, he weighed the contradictory and sketchy accounts that forced him to ask: "What did Koba actually do in 1905?" Trotsky concluded that Stalin's activities in the Caucasus, despite later attempts to portray them as heroic, were rather nondescript.

Kotkin, however, bases himself on Aleksandr Ostrovskii's 2002 book (*Who Stood Behind Stalin's Back*) and assures us that "during the Russo-Japanese War,...Stalin was raising hell in Georgian manganese mines" [185]. In 1905, 3,700 manganese miners went on strike and came under attack in the remote Georgian town of Chiatura. "In response to the physical attacks, Jughashvili [Stalin] helped transform Social Democratic agitation 'circles' into red combat brigades called Red Hundreds. By December 1905, the worker Red Hundreds, assisted by young radical thugs, seized control of Chiatura and thus of half of global manganese output.... Organizing mass direct action, Jugashvili was in his radical element—he helped transform nearly every mine into a battleground of Social Democratic Party factions, importing loyalists from his previous underground activity, especially Batum. Some observers marveled at his clique's intense loyalty. All the same, the Chiatura workers elected as their leader not Jugashvili but a tall, thin, charismatic Georgian youth named Noe Ramishvili...." [76-78].

Let us recall that, during 1905, 2.75 million people were on strike throughout the Russian Empire. In October, a general strike shut down the

capital, Petersburg, and in December, heavy fighting broke out in Moscow that was bloodily suppressed by government troops. Yet, one could easily conclude, after reading Kotkin's narrative of events, that Stalin's exploits in Georgia overshadowed Trotsky's leading role in Petersburg during that crucial year. Kotkin makes such absurd claims in order to downplay any suggestions that Stalin was later "out of his element" during the mass meetings, demonstrations and final seizure of power in 1917.

Although by any reasonable measure, Stalin's role in 1917 was dwarfed by Trotsky's as the latter guided the first successful socialist revolution, Kotkin wants the reader to believe that the articles Stalin wrote for the Bolshevik press at the time were nearly as significant as Trotsky's organization of the seizure of power as head of the Revolutionary Military Committee.

In fact, Kotkin's entire treatment of 1917 is extremely distorted. He insists that the October Revolution had little popular support, describing it variously as "the Bolshevik putsch [218]"; "the Bolshevik October 1917 coup, nominally against the Provisional Government but really against the Soviet" [223]; "the far-fetched Bolshevik coup" [296]; "this crazy putsch" [227]; and "Lenin's shock coup of 1917" [421]. Similar claims have been thoroughly answered in the opening chapter of David North's *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*: "The Bolshevik Seizure of Power in October 1917: Coup d'État or Revolution?" But Kotkin wants to go even further in falsifying the October Revolution: "the Communist regime had come into being as a result of a coup, and, while claiming to rule in the name of the proletariat, executed proletarians who dared to question the party's self-assigned monopoly" [418]. This lie, as with many others, is not substantiated by any evidence, documentary or otherwise. Kotkin, however, asserts it as a given.

Lastly, Kotkin's description of the October revolution as "Dadaesque,"—something he seems particularly proud of—is simply bizarre. In the framework of this review, it hardly bears mentioning. By comparison, Kotkin's treatment of the following historical events is much worse:

The Civil War: Kotkin spends most of his time attempting to prove that Trotsky was despised by the Red Army (relying partially on the outdated and inaccurate book by Francesco Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922*, first published in English in 1988). He gives a distorted picture of the military debate at the Eighth Party Congress in 1919, where Trotsky's theses on the military, defended by Lenin, were accepted over the vigorous opposition by Stalin, Voroshilov and Budenny. At one point, Kotkin claims, "Benvenuti established the depth and breadth of animosity to Trotsky early on" [790] and refers the reader to page 216 of Benvenuti's book. On that page, the Italian historian "established" no such degree of animosity, and certainly not its "depth and breadth." He

cites some of the charges made against Trotsky during the heated debate at the Congress, and then notes: “These accusations have survived a considerable length of time in Soviet works. In actual fact, Trotsky never pushed certain of his positions to their extreme conclusions” [Benvenuti, p. 216]. These caveats, however, did not prevent Kotkin from drawing his own extreme conclusions.

In judging Trotsky’s performance as leader of the Red Army during the Civil War, Lenin famously said to the writer Gorky in 1919: “Show me another man able to organize almost a model army within a single year and win the respect of the military specialists. We have such a man” [329]. Stalin had these words removed from later Soviet editions of Gorky’s reminiscences. Kotkin inexplicably feels that they were spoken by Lenin about his war commissar who “had gotten too big for his britches” [Ibid.]. And yet he grudgingly admits: “Had Lenin allowed Stalin and his band a complete victory over Trotsky in July 1919, the outcome of the other battle—the civil war against the Whites—might have turned out differently” [Ibid.]. Indeed, how “the other battle” might have turned out will be seen shortly with the Polish War of 1920.

The First Four Congresses of the Communist International (1919-1922): Trotsky wrote several of the most important founding documents of the Third (Communist) International in 1919; along with Lenin, he delivered many of the main reports to the first four congresses. Kotkin does little more than mock the Comintern; perhaps he is reluctant to examine it with any seriousness because Stalin played a relatively minor role in these years. At the second Congress, for instance, Kotkin describes what the delegates ate, where they stayed, and what plays they watched, but barely mentions any of the political issues that arose except the attention paid to the Polish campaign in July and August 1920. After Lenin’s death, the Comintern began undergoing “Bolshevization” at the hands of Zinoviev, Bukharin and Stalin (all trying to drive Trotsky from prominence). Kotkin pays slightly more attention to the Fifth Congress in 1924, but even here the analysis is extremely superficial and mainly directed at suggesting Trotsky’s political decline: “Stalin took over Trotsky’s seat on the Comintern executive committee” [550]. This is followed by reference to “the interminable denunciations of Trotsky and his foreign ‘stooges,’ ” but Kotkin does not explain who the “stooges” were, and what fundamental issues were at stake.

The Polish campaign of 1920: After Polish forces under Pilsudki invaded Soviet territory in March 1920, the Red Army drove them back and continued to advance on Warsaw, hoping that Polish workers would rise against their own bourgeoisie and establish a Soviet Poland. Stalin was in charge of forces advancing toward Lwów /Lviv, toward the south of Warsaw. Kotkin tries to portray Stalin’s blatant insubordination during the campaign in as positive a light as possible. Stalin’s refusal in early August to send his forces north toward Warsaw contributed significantly to the Red Army’s nearly catastrophic defeat, a fact that Stalin, Voroshilov and others worked mightily to conceal in later years. On August 17, Stalin “requested to be relieved of all his military duties” [365]. Kotkin laconically notes: “on September 1, 1920, the politburo accepted Stalin’s resignation from his military posts. The way was open to scapegoat his insubordination” [Ibid.].

Stalin indeed had to defend himself against sharp criticism by Trotsky, Lenin and others at the Ninth Party Conference in September 1920. In 2014, however, Kotkin steps forward as his advocate. In a curious section entitled “No Glory,” Kotkin renders Lenin almost incoherent and seems particularly bemused by Tukhachevsky’s words in a later book, *Pokhod za Vislu* [Campaign Beyond the Vistula]: “To export revolution was a possibility. Capitalist Europe was shaken to its foundations, and but for our strategic errors and our defeat in the field, the Polish War might have become the link between the October Revolution of 1917 and the revolution in Western Europe” [377-378]. Kotkin obviously dismisses the possibility of revolution in Western Europe and objects once again that

“the proletarian Stalin, having warned against such adventurism, [was] scapegoated for insubordination” [378].

Kotkin’s presentation of a blameless Stalin who opposed the “adventurism” of Lenin (and Tukhachevsky) is simply untenable. On July 13, 1920, when Polish forces seemed in disarray, Stalin wrote in a telegram to Lenin: “I don’t think that imperialism has ever been as weak as it is now, at the moment of Poland’s defeat, and we have never been as strong as we are now, so the more resolutely we behave ourselves, the better it will be for Russia and for international revolution.” As the Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk notes: “On July 24, in a telegram to Lenin that treated victory over Poland as a foregone conclusion, [Stalin] proposed ‘raising the question of organizing an insurrection in Italy and in such still precarious states as Hungary and Czechoslovakia (Romania will have to be crushed).’ ” (endnote 7) Why doesn’t Kotkin characterize these telegrams from Stalin as proof of his “adventurism”? Kotkin is also well aware that Trotsky, rather than Stalin, was opposed to advancing into Poland, but he deferred to Lenin’s judgement in the matter. At the time, only Rykov supported Trotsky. (endnote 8) But this well-known historical fact does not fit Kotkin’s narrative.

Rather than explaining the historical consequences of the disastrous Polish campaign, Kotkin focuses on a comparatively insignificant detail: the glory that Stalin did not receive. Not long after the Polish defeat, the remaining White forces under Wrangel were driven out of Crimea. Kotkin concludes his sub-chapter with an odd lament for his hero: “There was no glory for Stalin: he had originally been assigned Wrangel’s destruction, but had resigned his military posts over the Polish campaign” [379].

The New Economic Policy (NEP): At the 10th Party Congress, as the delegates were confronted by the crisis of the Kronstadt rebellion, Lenin introduced a shift in economic policy away from war communism to what became known as the New Economic Policy. Under this policy, forced grain requisition was replaced by a tax in kind and limited capitalist trade was allowed, giving peasants the opportunity to market their surpluses in the cities. The commanding heights of the economy (heavy industry, transport, etc.) remained under state control (and ownership). Kotkin portrays Trotsky as a determined enemy of NEP from beginning to end, which completely falsifies the historical record. He even claims in an endnote that “Trotsky’s self-presentation in emigration of his alleged anticipation of NEP is wildly inaccurate” [note 274, p. 800].

One of the sources that Kotkin cites to substantiate his assertion is Viktor Danilov’s 1990 article, “We are Starting to Learn about Trotsky” [*Ekho*, No. 1, 1990, pp. 47-62]. Danilov, one of the greatest specialists in the history of Soviet agriculture, comments on several chapters of Pierre Broué’s biography of Trotsky that had recently been published in the Soviet press: “...it was Trotsky who in February 1920 proposed the abandonment of *prodrazviorstka* —compulsory deliveries of all ‘surplus’ grain, as defined by local officialdom—by a tax in kind.... To carry through these proposals would have led inevitably to a recognition and acceptance of market relations with the aim of revitalizing the peasant economy. This of course was to be the starting-point for the New Economic Policy of 1921.... In his analysis of Trotsky’s views on NEP, Broué demonstrated convincingly their closeness to Lenin’s.” (endnote 9) In other words, Danilov writes the exact opposite of what Kotkin claims. (endnote 10)

Furthermore, throughout his twisted narrative, Kotkin invents Trotsky as one who was trying to become an economic dictator while Stalin was consolidating his control over the party: “Trotsky was busy trying to seize command over the economy.... But the kind of planning Trotsky desired was incompatible with the NEP” [481]. Here Kotkin obfuscates a genuine issue: how to increase the relative weight of the planned sector of the economy while reducing the market sector that could undermine the “smychka” [alliance] between the working class and peasantry. Trotsky would develop proposals to give the State Planning Commission (Gosplan) legislative powers, proposals that were initially opposed by

Lenin in early 1922. Lenin would shift his position and agree with Trotsky in November.

The more theoretical sides of this issue would later be fought out not only by Trotsky, but by Preobrazhensky, a prominent supporter of Trotsky in the Left Opposition. Bukharin would supply Stalin with most of the arguments attacking the Left Opposition's economic policy during the mid-1920s.

Kotkin never gives a truthful characterization of how Lenin judged Trotsky's views regarding the NEP. He writes: "Stalin accepted the NEP. To put the matter another way, in 1922, Stalin could have his party dictatorship and Lenin's NEP. Trotsky could not have his economic dictatorship and the NEP. This means that the charges of Trotskyism that Stalin would level, with all manner of distortions, nonetheless had some basis: Trotsky on the economy was forcefully pushing against Lenin's foundational policy" [486-487].

Kotkin does not refer to a document that overturns his argument completely. On November 25, 1922, Lenin wrote to Trotsky, with copies to Zinoviev, Bukharin, Radek, Stalin and Kamenev:

2. I have read your theses regarding the NEP and find them in general to be very good, and some formulations are extremely apt, but a small portion of the points seemed debatable to me. I would advise to print them for now in the newspapers, and then to republish them as a pamphlet without fail. With some commentary they will be particularly good for acquainting the foreign public with our new economic policy. (endnote 11)

Lenin clearly endorsed Trotsky's views on NEP, and wanted them widely circulated. The truth is that neither in 1922 nor later was Trotsky trying to become an "economic dictator" or "super industrializer" as Kotkin claims. These are recycled Stalinist lies that dominated Soviet historical accounts right up to the end of Perestroika. Nor should one forget that it would be Stalin who abruptly put an end to the NEP in 1928-1929 in such a reckless and voluntaristic manner that it would bring the Soviet Union to the brink of civil war.

Stalin as the creator rather than the creation of the growing bureaucracy: Kotkin takes strong exception to Trotsky's assessment of Stalin: "Trotsky famously wrote that 'Stalin did not create the apparatus. The apparatus created him.' (footnote 19) This was exactly backward. Stalin created the apparatus, and it was a colossal feat" [424]. Once again, the evidence Kotkin provides contradicts his thesis. He clearly portrays the rapid growth of the party apparatus which was organized largely by Sverdlov before his death in March 1919: "Party committees mushroomed from under 600 in 1917 to 8,000 by 1919" [423]. By most accounts, Sverdlov mastered the intricacies of party appointments better than anyone else; after he died, various configurations of the central committee's secretariat struggled to replace the man who was seen as almost irreplaceable. At one point, three of Trotsky's closest comrades (Serebriakov, Preobrazhensky and Krestinsky) made up the secretariat, but they were replaced at the 10th Party Congress in 1921 in the wake of the acrimonious trade union debate of 1920.

In April 1922, Zinoviev proposed that Stalin become general secretary of the central committee. In *My Life*, Trotsky writes that Zinoviev's initiative "was quite against Lenin's will.... No one attached much importance to this appointment. Under Lenin, the post of general secretary, established by the tenth congress, could have only a technical character, never political. Yet Lenin had his fears. 'This cook will make only peppery dishes,' he would say of Stalin." (endnote 12) Lenin did not, however, block Stalin's appointment.

Kotkin notes that "Stalin now became the only person simultaneously in

the politburo, orgburo, and secretariat" [424]. Oddly, Kotkin prefaces this statement with a quotation from Lenin: " 'The power [vlast'] of the Central Committee is colossal.... We dispose of 200,000-400,000 party functionaries, and through them thousands upon thousands of nonparty people. And this gigantic Communist cause is utterly befouled by foggy bureaucratism!" [Ibid.]. Kotkin avers that Stalin "proved capable of wielding the levers he inherited, and of inventing new ones.... Stalin, in his midforties, found his calling at the party apparatus" [Ibid.] With these statements, Kotkin inexplicably appears to be building a case not against Trotsky but against himself. He continues: "But what stands out most about Stalin's ascendancy is that, structurally, he was handed the possibility of a personal dictatorship, and he began to realize that potential just by fulfilling the duties of general secretary. Stalin had exceptional power almost instantaneously" [424-425].

The extent of Stalin's power can be partially grasped by the fact that "The orgburo made at least a thousand appointments just between April 1922 and March 1923, including no fewer than forty-two new provincial party bosses" [432]. With these appointments, Stalin could select the very people, loyal to him, who would be mobilized against the Left Opposition headed by Trotsky in the fall of 1923. The votes at central committee plenums were virtually predetermined by this appointment process, and inner-party democracy became alarmingly undermined. Although Lenin was not actively participating in the debates in late 1923, he did the most he could in late 1922 and early 1923 to address the problem of Stalin's untrammelled power.

The "troika" of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin (also known as the triumvirate or triumvirs): Kotkin downplays the significance of the unprincipled faction formed by Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin against Trotsky within the Politburo during Lenin's protracted illness starting in 1922. He even claims that "A consolidated 'triumvirate' against Trotsky had yet to form in summer 1923" [506]. Most historians place the formation of the troika in 1922, but stress that Zinoviev and Kamenev both considered Stalin to be their inferior, thereby underestimating his growing control over the levers of the party apparatus. Kotkin, however, not only postpones the troika's formation, but recruits Molotov to make Lenin a co-conspirator against Trotsky: "Lenin proposed that we gather for the politburo meetings without Trotsky," Molotov recalled. "We conspired against him" [415]. Unfortunately, Kotkin gives no proper citation to this passage in Chuev's *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym* [*One Hundred Forty Conversations with Molotov*]. Even if it were true on its face, no date is provided for Molotov's claim, rendering it useless as evidence for Kotkin's argument. Indeed, the Molotov reference proves nothing, although Kotkin asserts, without any proof, that Molotov's "recollections comport with the archival record" [415].

There is one document that Kotkin is decidedly reluctant to examine closely. On May 25-27, 1922, Lenin had his first major stroke. He left for the village of Gorki in the outskirts of Moscow to rest as much as possible and undergo treatment. Over the next four months, his medical condition improved enough for him to return to work in Moscow on October 2, 1922.

At some point (endnote 13), probably in July 1922, Lenin passed the following note to Kamenev:

I think exaggerations can be avoided. '(The Central Committee) is casting or is preparing to cast a healthy cannon overboard', you write. **Isn't that an immense exaggeration?** To throw Trotsky overboard—for you are hinting at that, there is no other interpretation—is the height of absurdity. If you do not consider me to have become hopelessly stupid, then how can you think of such a thing???? Bloody children in my eyes.... (endnote 14)

Without explanation, Kotkin omits the words in bold. The unjustifiable effect is to soften Lenin's alarm. Kotkin's only comment is the one sentence with which he prefaced the note: "Around this time, Lenin reacted sharply to efforts by Kamenev and Stalin to reduce Trotsky's position." That's all. He doesn't consider any greater implications of Lenin's words—i.e., how shocked Lenin was by the maneuvers against Trotsky during his absence from the Kremlin. Certainly Lenin could see the danger of a looming split in the Politburo. Nor does Kotkin link it to Lenin's unquestionable turn to Trotsky in late 1922 and early 1923 in an attempt to curb the triumvirate's power, and Stalin's in particular.

To be continued

Endnotes

[7] See Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, p. 60. [return]

[8] See Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970, pp. 455-460. See also Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1954, pp. 458-473. [return]

[9] Victor Danilov, "We are Starting to Learn about Trotsky," translated by Cathy Porter, in: *History Workshop*, Issue 29, Spring 1990, pp. 138-139. [return]

[10] For more on Trotsky's anticipation of NEP, see Richard B. Day, "Comment on the Origins of the NEP," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, No. 1-2 (Spring-Summer, 1977), pp. 60-67. [return]

[11] Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, v. 54, p. 314. [return]

[12] Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970, p. 467. [return]

[13] In 1991, Naumov dated the note October 2, 1922, in the article "1923 god" in *Kommunist*, 1991, No. 5, pp. 30-42. In a later collection, the editors dated the note between 14 and 18 July 1922. See V. I. Lenin. *Neizvestnye dokumenty, 1891-1922*, Moskva: ROSSPEN, 1999, p. 544. [return]

[14] The last sentence is from Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*. It can refer to murdered victims in the play, or be used colloquially to mean, "I am stunned." [return]

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