

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

## Part 4

By Fred Williams  
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*This is the conclusion of a four-part review of Stephen Kotkin's Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928. Part one* was published on June 1, *part two* on June 2 and *part three* on June 3.

### Lenin's "Testament"

After Lenin returned to work in October 1922, he hardly spared himself as he attended meetings, gave speeches, wrote articles, conducted correspondence, etc. In November, several political issues emerged in which Lenin increasingly turned to Trotsky for support within the Politburo. This placed him more and more at odds with Stalin.

The first issue, the monopoly of foreign trade, is well documented and should not offer any opportunity for dramatic reinterpretation. This issue had been contested since early 1921, with Lenin insistently pursuing the same line throughout. Stalin and the majority of the Politburo repeatedly prepared resolutions to weaken the monopoly of foreign trade, allowing direct trade between private capitalists (Nepmen) in Russia and the world market. When Lenin learned of these proposals, he became extremely alarmed at their potential to undermine the entire Soviet economic system. Then, on October 6, at a Central Committee plenum that Lenin did not attend, a motion was passed limiting the state's foreign trade monopoly.

It soon became clear that the only Politburo member who fully shared Lenin's view was Trotsky. Lenin turned to him in several letters, and made it known to the rest of the Politburo that he was calling on Trotsky to defend their common views: [Lenin to Trotsky, December 13, 1922]: "...it is my request that at the forthcoming plenum you should undertake the defense of our common standpoint on the unquestionable need to maintain and consolidate the foreign trade monopoly" (endnote 15); [Lenin to Stalin, December 15, 1922]: "I have also come to an arrangement with Trotsky to stand up for my views of the foreign trade monopoly." Later, the same day: "I am resolutely opposed to any delay on the question of the foreign trade monopoly. If the idea should arise, ... to postpone it until the next plenum, I should most resolutely object to this, because I am sure that Trotsky will be able to stand up for my views just as well as I myself. ... any further hesitation on this highly important question is absolutely intolerable and will tend to frustrate my work" (endnote 16); [Lenin to Trotsky, December 15, 1922]: "I consider that we have quite reached agreement. I ask you to declare our solidarity at the plenum." (endnote 17)

On December 18, the plenum rescinded the relaxation of the foreign trade monopoly. Lenin then wrote to Trotsky on December 21: "It looks as though it has been possible to take the position without a single shot, by a simple maneuver. I suggest that we should not stop and should continue the offensive..." (endnote 18)

In a breathtakingly dishonest account of the above events, Kotkin writes: "This letter [Lenin to Stalin, December 15] would serve, in

Trotsky's memoirs, as evidence that Lenin had proposed that he and Trotsky form a 'bloc' on the trade monopoly, and that Lenin and Stalin suffered a break in relations over this question, on top of their national question contretemps. But in an exchange of letters around this time, both Lenin and Trotsky underscored not just their partial agreement (trade monopoly) but their continuing differences (planning). Moreover, on the trade monopoly, just as on the USSR structure, Stalin readily acceded to Lenin's wishes. There was no bloc and no break" [483].

Matters get worse in the more complex issues of the national question (how Georgia would enter the structure of the Soviet Union; displays of Great Russian chauvinism toward the Georgian Communist Party during the heated debates over this question; Ordzhonikidze slapping a Georgian party member; Dzerzhinsky's and Stalin's defense of Ordzhonikidze, etc.); the debate over what powers to give the State Planning Commission (Gosplan); how to reorganize the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection (which Stalin had headed); and finally, how to prevent a split in the Central Committee and the Party as a whole if the disputes between Stalin and Trotsky grew even sharper in the wake of Lenin's impending death. (endnote 19)

In discussing these events, Kotkin plays a thoroughly dishonest game with the reader. Every document or testimony that does not fit his narrative, he dismisses as a forgery; any incident that violates his narrative, he claims never occurred. In order to concoct this string of falsifications, Kotkin has to turn the following people into unprincipled liars and conspirators: Trotsky, Krupskaya (Lenin's wife), Fotieva (one of Lenin's secretaries), Volodicheva (another of Lenin's secretaries), Maria Ulyanova (Lenin's sister), and at least some of the doctors attending Lenin. He also has to overturn the accounts given by the following historians: Carr, Deutscher, Daniels, Lewin, Volkogonov, Rogovin, Nazarov, Khlevniuk, Naumov, and many others. He also must dismiss Valentinov, Bazhanov and Avtorkhanov.

Kotkin takes advantage of potential confusion over what constitutes Lenin's "Testament." Most historians include all the letters, articles and dictations, taken together, from December 1922 through March 6, 1923. The Stalinist historian Valentin Sakharov, on whom Kotkin relies almost entirely in his analysis, accepts the authenticity of most of these items, but denies Lenin's authorship of the following items: "The Letter to the Congress" [dictations of 24-25 December 1922 and 4 January 1923]; the "notes" [more accurately: article] "On the Question of Nationalities or on 'Autonomization'"; and the letters to Trotsky [5 March 1923], Stalin [5 March 1923], and to Mdivani, Makharadze and others [6 March 1923] (endnote 20). Sakharov devotes more than 1000 pages to constructing an argument that few but the most ardent Stalinists find compelling. (endnote 21)

Kotkin certainly agrees with many of Sakharov's overt political attacks

on both Lenin and Trotsky, but he sometimes takes a simpler approach: he suggests that Lenin was simply too ill to write or dictate the items in question. Lenin did indeed have at least four major strokes on May 25-27, 1922, December 13, December 22, and then March 9-10, 1923. The arteriosclerosis that was damaging portions of his brain finally resulted in his death on January 21, 1924. During the protracted period of several months, there were days of paralysis, inability to speak or other incapacitation. And almost miraculously, there were days of dramatic improvement. According to Valentinov, “Kramer, one of the doctors treating Lenin, always said that Lenin’s vitality, the strength of his resistance to the illness, were a phenomenal occurrence in the history of this illness” [Valentinov, pp. 38-39]. In a splenetic sub-chapter called “Suspicious Dictation,” Kotkin, however, quotes the same Dr. Kramer, in February 1923, to make quite another point: “Vladimir Ilich was finding it hard to recall either a word he wanted or he was unable to read what he had dictated to the secretary, or he would begin to say something completely incoherent” [489]. The reader might well conclude that Lenin could not have dictated his “Letter to the Congress” or his last letters in March if things were so bad in February. But Kotkin dishonestly cuts the first part of the quotation: “Professor Kramer recorded that hope for a recovery was sustained until March 1923, even though in February there were renewed signs of ‘breaks in his speech, at first negligible, but then more significant, **though always fleeting...**” [Volkogonov, p. 421; emphasis added]. In an endnote, Kotkin adds: “Volkogonov correctly noted that ‘it is remarkable that Lenin was capable of dictating these lengthy works in such a short time...’ But Volkogonov failed to connect the dots: Lenin indeed could not have dictated all that work.” He also admonishes Lewin: “Moshe Lewin correctly grasped that the message of the alleged Lenin Testament, essentially, was to fight nationalism in favor of internationalism, to fight bureaucracy, especially the party leadership, and to remove Stalin, but Lewin did not question the legitimacy of the documents...” [note 186, p. 825].

Lewin did not question the legitimacy of the documents, because there are no grounds to do so. This does not mean that Kotkin doesn’t try. To do so, he engages in pure speculation, something he claimed in the preface (and public lectures) that he would not do if he were lacking documentation: “Scholars have perpetuated Trotsky’s falsehood concerning retention of the foreign trade monopoly that only he had won the day at the plenum on Lenin’s behalf” [note 74, p. 821]; “Trotsky, in his memoirs, invented a conversation with Lenin about attacking the bureaucratism in the state but also in the party, specifically targeting the orgburo, Stalin’s source of power” [note 75, p. 821]; “Stalin did not phone Krupskaya on December 22 and curse her out” [note 76, p. 822]; “Lenin was also credited with dictating ‘Better Fewer but Better’... Trotsky claimed that he forced a meeting to get this dictation published in *Pravda*” [note 117, p. 823]; “No one learned of the dictation of December 24 or December 25 right away—because it likely did not happen then” [note 177, p. 825]; “Later, Trotsky himself would give reason to suspect his involvement in the dictation, which, according to him, ‘rounds out and clarifies the proposal that Lenin made me in our last conversation.’ According to Trotsky, Lenin ‘was systematically preparing to deliver at the 12th congress a crushing blow at Stalin as personifying bureaucracy, the mutual shielding among officials, arbitrary rule and general rudeness.’ Trotsky hilariously added that ‘The idea of a “bloc of Lenin and Trotsky” against the apparatus-men and bureaucrats was at that time fully known only to Lenin and me.’ The reason it was not ‘known’ to anyone else is that Trotsky imagined it” [note 187, p. 826].

Although Trotsky is Kotkin’s most frequent target, Krupskaya is also accused: “Krupskaya would characterize Stalin’s rudeness over the phone as extraordinary, but this is not corroborated by any other source” [488]; “Perhaps Krupskaya was deliberately trying to stage a memorable incident” [Ibid.]. “Perhaps Krupskaya, interpolating Lenin’s intentions,

concocted all three March letters. Perhaps she first mouthed the words to Lenin and he mouthed them back. Perhaps he mumbled versions of them himself. We shall likely never know” [491]. The one scenario that Kotkin will not consider is that Lenin dictated them coherently.

Kotkin leans, however, to a much wider conspiracy: “Lenin’s alleged ‘Notes’ were dated December 30– 31, 1922... The existing evidence strongly points to a maneuver by Krupskaya, and the staff in Lenin’s secretariat, to forge what they interpreted as Lenin’s will. They knew he was exercised over the Georgian affair; indeed, they egged him on over it. Trotsky might also have been complicit by this point” [493-494].

Unfortunately for Kotkin, “the existing evidence” does not exist. Why, then, does he engage in such speculation and outright lying?

If one follows carefully the content of Lenin’s last letters, articles and dictations, it would be impossible to conclude that Stalin is Lenin’s true heir and most devoted pupil. But that is precisely what Kotkin is trying to prove throughout this whole volume. He would probably rather fall down dead than admit that Lenin and Trotsky collaborated ever more closely during Lenin’s last months of political life.

Much to this reviewer’s surprise, some of Lenin’s most embittered critics have expressed their dissatisfaction with Kotkin’s presentation of Lenin’s last documents. None other than Richard Pipes quotes from Lenin’s “Testament”:

Stalin is too rude and this shortcoming, fully tolerable within our midst and in our relations as Communists, becomes intolerable in the post of General Secretary. For this reason I suggest that the comrades consider how to transfer Stalin from this post and replace him with someone who in all other respects enjoys over Comrade Stalin only one advantage, namely greater patience, greater loyalty, greater courtesy and attentiveness to comrades, less capriciousness, etc. (endnote 22)

Pipes then continues:

This powerful denunciation of Stalin, first published in *The New York Times* in 1926 (translated by Max Eastman), had to wait thirty years before it became public knowledge in the Soviet Union, following Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress. Subsequently it was included in the fifth edition of Lenin’s *Collected Works*.

Given these facts, it comes as a considerable surprise to have Kotkin reject the Testament as very likely a fabrication. He refers to it as a document “attributed” to Lenin whose authenticity “has never been proven.” Although Kotkin acknowledges that it could be authentic, he does not clearly accept it as such, as it has been by all other historians; as noted, it is included in Lenin’s *Collected Works*. Kotkin points to the fact that no stenographic originals of the document exist. But he contradicts himself by citing Stalin’s own references to the Testament and his admission, according to an account by Trotsky of a party meeting, that he was indeed “rude.” Stalin, in whose interest it was to denounce the Testament as a forgery, never did so, as Kotkin himself admits: indeed, he referred to it as “the known letter of comrade Lenin.”

Pipes refers to Stalin’s verbal abuse of Krupskaya and then quotes from Lenin’s article on the nationality question in which he called Stalin “a crude Great-Russian Derzhimorda” [thuggish police type]. Pipes concludes:

Kotkin does not cite this document either but simply dismisses it as “a blatant forgery,” although it has been accepted by all historians of the period of whom I am aware as well as the editors of Lenin’s *Collected Works*.

It is difficult to explain Kotkin’s skepticism of Lenin’s late anti-Stalin diatribes except perhaps by his unwillingness to concede that, supportive as Lenin had been of Stalin until his fatal illness, by the end of his life he had turned resolutely against him.

Pipes is certainly justified in struggling to explain Kotkin’s approach. It is no exaggeration to say that Chapter 11, entitled “Remove Stalin,” in which Kotkin violates basic historical standards in dealing with Lenin’s “Testament,” is enough to discredit the entire book. A few more words must be said about topics poorly covered in further chapters.

**The Left Opposition:** Kotkin shows no grasp of its formation, program or influence. There is no examination of the Declaration of the 46 in October 1923, which is usually treated as a founding document of the Left Opposition. Nor does Kotkin explore in any detail the New Course debate in November-December 1923. His presentation of the “Literary Discussion” (the furious attacks by Stalin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and others against Trotsky’s “Lessons of October” in the fall of 1924) is cursory at best. There is no examination of the Platform of the United Opposition (1927), or how its policies were a serious alternative to those of Stalin and his supporters. Inexplicably, Kotkin even falsifies the number of signatories to one of the main Opposition documents in 1927: “Trotsky and Zinoviev, along with more than four score supporters, sent a long document known as the Declaration of the 84 for the initial signatories (a number that would grow above 300) to the Central Committee, ... it was a full-throated anti-NEP, pro-revolution leftists manifesto. ‘Declaration of the 84,’ in Trotsky, *Challenge of the Left Opposition*, II, 224-39” [endnote 182, p. 848]. On page 226 of the source Kotkin cites, the editors note: “Later the number of signatories rose to five hundred, and still later to three thousand”; Kotkin thereby undercounts the signatories by a factor of ten, suggesting that the Opposition had many fewer supporters than they actually had.

Many pages would be required to address Kotkin’s (mis)treatment of the revolutionary situation in Germany 1923, the British General Strike of 1926 and the Chinese Revolution of 1925-1927. Each of these colossal defeats of the working class strengthened the stranglehold of the Soviet bureaucracy and contributed to the organizational defeat of the United Opposition at the XVth Party Congress of 1927. Most leading oppositionists were expelled from the party, and from that point on, oppositional activities against Stalin’s policies were subject to criminal sanctions. Trotsky would be exiled to Central Asia, many other leading oppositionists would be scattered to remote corners of the Soviet Union and Stalin’s dictatorship over the party fully embodied a profound reaction against the very tenets of the October Revolution.

**Stalin’s trip to Siberia in January 1928.** Kotkin presents some interesting details about Stalin’s secret trip, but mainly to show how strong-willed Stalin was, even in the face of a looming catastrophe and loss of support among his closest cohorts. The Siberian trip set the stage for Stalin’s complete forced collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union, the topic which will open the second volume of Kotkin’s biography.

## Conclusion

Kotkin’s book serves definite social forces in today’s politically volatile world. His main goal is to identify the crimes of Stalinism with Marxism, an undertaking pursued by Richard Pipes, Robert Service, Jörg

Baberowski and many others. Collectively, they want to ensure that anyone who is looking for an alternative to capitalism is turned away from the revolutionary traditions embodied in the October Revolution and defended by Lenin and Trotsky. In their minds, Marxism ineluctably leads to Stalinism, and the true alternative to Stalinism—Trotskyism—must be distorted and falsified beyond recognition.

In his own eagerness to refute Marxism, Kotkin comes perilously close to openly embracing fascism. His praise for Mussolini’s regime in Italy is so effusive that he somewhat sheepishly adds: “None of this is meant to uphold Italian fascism in any way as a model, but merely to spotlight that nothing prevented the Communist dictatorship from embracing private capital—nothing, that is, except *idées fixes*” [725].

Kotkin reveals his own *idée fixe* in the book’s concluding chapter, “Coda.” Here his profound admiration of Stalin’s will-power reaches absurd proportions. One senses that Kotkin set out to refute the Marxist approach to the role of the individual in history: he thereby produces a Nietzschean hymn to Stalin’s voluntarism as he berates Carr for his overall assessment of Stalin. In 1958, Carr had written: “Stalin illustrates the thesis that circumstances make the man, not the man the circumstances” [Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, I., 192]. Kotkin’s response today? “Utterly, eternally wrong. Stalin 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” [740]. There is no hint of the social forces that supported Stalin as he carried out his policies. Classes simply disappear, and Stalin emerges as a superhuman figure, reshaping the global landscape as his will happens to dictate.

To the extent that he can, Kotkin blames Lenin for Stalin’s actions: “Stalin intensified the insanity inherent in Leninism from conviction and personal characteristics, ensuring that the permanent state of war with the whole world led to a state of war with the country’s majority population, and carrying the Leninist program to its full end goal of anti-capitalism” [737].

Trotsky, meanwhile, is simply dismissed: “Without Lenin, Trotsky never again demonstrated the leadership that he had in 1917 and during the civil war under Lenin’s authority. On the very uneven playing field of the personal dictatorship that Stalin inherited by dint of his appointment as general secretary and Lenin’s stroke, Trotsky was still capable of brilliant polemics, but not of building an ever-wider faction, dividing his enemies, subsuming his convictions to necessary tactical considerations. More than that, Trotsky had never been an indefatigable, nitty-gritty administrator or a strategist capable of ruthlessly opportunistic improvisation. Whatever the overlap between his and Stalin’s core beliefs [!], Stalin’s abilities and resolve were an order of magnitude greater” [737-738]. With these words, Kotkin demonstrates that he has no inkling of the principled politics guiding Trotsky’s activity. Little does he know that “ruthlessly opportunistic improvisation” was not what made Trotsky one of the two main leaders of the October Revolution.

Lenin and Trotsky are thus the real targets of Kotkin’s biography of Stalin. When considering their joint role in October 1917, Kotkin approvingly notes that “the Bolshevik putsch could have been prevented by a pair of bullets” [223]. With this first volume, Kotkin tries to do on the historical front what bullets failed to do in 1917.

As bad as this first volume of the Stalin biography is, it is safe to say that the second volume will be even worse. Having failed miserably in his treatment of 1878-1928, Kotkin will show that he is equally incapable of covering the complex issues of collectivization, famine, the Great Terror, the Stalin-Hitler Pact and the opening of World War II (1929-1941). And yet the shameless reviewers will probably shower as much praise on volume two as they do on volume one: these unwarranted accolades are a sharp expression of the decay of critical thought that is far too widespread

in American academia and the mass media today.

*Concluded*

Endnotes

[15] Lenin, *Collected Works*, v. 45, p. 601.[return]

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 603.[return]

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 604.[return]

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 606.[return]

[19] Kotkin gives an incredible reading of Lenin's "Letter to the Congress" in which he warns of a split: "The dictation warned that 'these two qualities of the two outstanding leaders of the present Central Committee'— Stalin's incaution, Trotsky's self-assured political daftness— 'can inadvertently lead to a schism, and if our party does not take steps to avert this, the schism may come unexpectedly'" [500]. Anyone who reads Lenin's actual words will find no hint at "Trotsky's political daftness." Lenin actually states: "Comrade Trotsky, on the other hand, as his struggle against the C. C. on the question of the People's Commissariat for Communications has already proved, is distinguished not only by outstanding ability. He is personally perhaps the most capable man in the present C. C., but he has displayed excessive self-assurance and shown excessive preoccupation with the purely administrative side of the work" [See Lenin, "Letter to the Congress," *Collected Works*, v. 36, p. 594-595]. [return]

[20] Valentin Sakharov, *Na rasput'e* [At the Crossroads], M: Akva-Term, 2012, p. 7.[return]

[21] In a new biography of Stalin (which will soon appear in English), the respected Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk writes: "Until recently, the authenticity of the anti-Stalinist dictations and activities of Lenin, which logically form a general picture, never raised any doubts. Only in recent years have attempts been made in Russia to declare Lenin's assessments a falsification [a footnote refers to Sakharov's 2003 book on Lenin's testament]. Despite a pseudo-scientific presentation and references to archives, these attempts are not genuinely scientific. As a result, everything has been reduced to an absurd conspiratorial version: the anti-Stalinist dictations were fabricated and then slipped into Lenin's archive by Trotsky's supporters!" (Oleg Khlevniuk, *Stalin. Zhizn' odnogo vozhdia* [Stalin. Life of One Leader], Moskva, AST, 2015, p. 112).[return]

[22] Richard Pipes, "The Cleverness of Joseph Stalin," *New York Review of Books*, November 20, 2014.[return]

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