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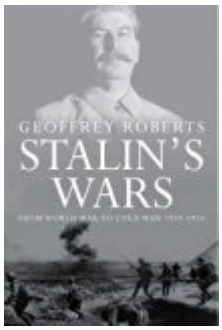
Geoffrey Roberts. *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 496 S. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-11204-7.



Reviewed by Jonathan House

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The Soviet Union performed the lion's share of the efforts that defeated Nazi Germany in World War II. Arguably, therefore, the single person most responsible for the Allied victory was Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, the Soviet dictator. For decades, however, Cold War politics--and then revisionism--caused historians to emphasize Stalin's ruthlessness and paranoia while downplaying his contribution to the war effort. Just as most Germans blamed Adolf Hitler for all their defeats, so Soviet leaders from Nikita Khrushchev onward tended to depict Stalin as a bungling butcher who was saved by the undoubted self-sacrifice of the Soviet peoples.

Geoffrey Roberts, a history professor in Cork, Ireland, has undertaken a systematic review of the dictator's role in both World War II and the ensuing Cold War. In an unusual form of revisionism, Roberts concludes that the contemporaneous view of Stalin as a great war leader was largely justified. Without minimizing Stalin's mistakes or his paranoia, the author maintains that the dictator was a key factor in the Soviet victory: "Without him the efforts of the [Communist] party, the people, the armed forces and their generals would have been considerably less effective" (p. 373).

To demonstrate his contention, Roberts uses the growing, if still limited, access to Soviet archives that historians have been exploiting for over one decade. For example, analysts of Stalin's official appointments calendar have indicated that he was involved in a series of critical meetings and decisions immediately after the 1941 German invasion, at a time when (according to Khrushchev) the dictator was in shocked depression as a result of the attack. The author uses a similar source to argue that G. K. Zhukov, the deputy commander in chief, had exaggerated his own role in convincing Stalin of the 1942 counterattack plan that eventually destroyed the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Employing similar documentation, Roberts ably summarizes the major decisions of World War II without either exaggerating or downplaying the Soviet leader's role in those decisions. This account repeatedly endorses the conclusions of David Glantz and others that Stalin learned to trust the professionalism of his

generals, resulting in a fundamental change in his leadership style.

Stalin's Wars is perhaps more original in arguing that the dictator genuinely wished to continue the wartime Grand Alliance with Great Britain and the United States into the postwar period. Stalin, Roberts argues, wanted to maintain this alliance--if only because he thought Germany and Japan would eventually recover and pose a renewed threat to world security. The author reinterprets the events of the mid-1940s in an effort to show that, while determined to ensure Soviet security in Eastern Europe, Stalin saw no reason why compromise was not possible on many other issues. Consider, for example, the August 1944 Warsaw Uprising, when the Polish underground tried to seize control just as Soviet tanks approached the city. Traditionally, Western commentators have believed that the Red Army deliberately allowed the Germans to repress the uprising so that the Soviets would not have to deal with right-wing Poles. Roberts contends that, to the contrary, Stalin and his generals made strenuous efforts to relieve the Warsaw insurgents, but that Allied criticism of these efforts helped convince Stalin that he could not, in fact, compromise with the Polish government in exile.

In the postwar era, Roberts argues that the Soviet Union rejected the 1947 Marshall Plan for reconstruction of Europe primarily because the British and French governments sought to create a multinational agency to administer this aid. Such an agency would prevent each government, including Moscow, from negotiating privately and directly with Washington, and it was this issue that allegedly marked Stalin's breaking point with the United States. More surprisingly, the author downplays the 1948-49 Berlin Blockade, often seen as the crystallizing event of the entire era. According to Roberts, Stalin halted the blockade as soon as he achieved his goal of causing the West to reconvene the postwar Council of Foreign Ministers; allegedly, the Soviets did not anticipate that the isolation of Berlin would tar them as the aggressors in Europe. Overall, Stalin wrongly expected the British and Americans to "accept their complete exclusion from the Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe," even though "Stalin was self-evidently meddling in their sphere in Western Europe through the good offices of the western communist parties" (p. 253).

Indeed, one of the lesser conclusions of *Stalin's Wars* is the degree to which the pragmatic, ruthless Stalin was often a prisoner of his own Marxist ideology. For example, in 1947, Stalin wanted East German leaders to draft a constitution for a united Germany and then sponsor widespread discussion of their draft in West Germany. Five years later, he told the same Germans that the United States was determined to maintain an army in Germany to control Europe, not to deter the Soviets. Each of these statements betrays a regrettable ignorance concerning the motivations of his opponents and their perceptions of Soviet actions. In the same vein, Roberts claims that Stalin had always intended to evacuate Iran after World War II, but incurred Western ire by delaying that withdrawal because he felt ideologically committed to the Azeri Communists in the area.

If this study has a weakness, it lies in the relative brevity of the author's discussion of the Korean War. Roberts suggests that, on the basis of the 1949 Communist success in China, the Soviet leader wrongly concluded that the United States was unwilling or incapable of stopping further expansion in Asia, and therefore that North Korea could safely attack the South. While such observations are useful, the level of detail for Korea is far less than that displayed in the chapters on World War II, probably because of the relative paucity of Soviet documents and memoirs on the subject. Nonetheless, given the book's title and its extensive discussion of the later 1940s, the reader could reasonably expect greater attention to Stalin's last and most disastrous conflict. To cite but one example, there is only a passing mention of the deci-

sion that committed the Soviet Air Force to help defend North Korea, at a cost of 355 aircraft lost and 299 Soviet casualties.[1]

With that minor exception, this book is an excellent, highly readable summation and reinterpretation of a broad sweep of Soviet military and diplomatic history. As such, it is a worthy study for historians and the general public alike.

Note

[1]. These figures are taken from G. F. Krivosheev, ed., *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century* (London: Greenhill Books; Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1997), 281.