Stalin against the World

The cold war’s end opened the prospect that historians might write its history in a manner less disturbed by the passions and political commitments that it had stirred. Some may have hoped that with the aid of hindsight and newly available evidence, a more detached examination of the period might lead to new understanding. Gregor Dallas takes a different approach. He offers a passionate indictment of what he describes as the Soviet Union’s war against the West, stretching from the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939 through the 1950s.

This sprawling, popularly pitched work argues that the “war that never ended” was waged by Stalin and the Soviet Union against the non-communist world. The so-called “alliance” between the Soviet Union, Great Britain and the United States against the Third Reich, Dallas insists, was a fiction. In reality, from at least 1939 onward Stalin fought a war to spread Soviet influence and he had no real alliance with the British or Americans. Dallas maintains that the cold war began far earlier than 1947.

The book, which is based mainly on readings in published works, highlights the important points of conflict among the Big Three during the war. The Soviet failure to support the Warsaw uprising in 1944 stands out as a salient case. The closing months of combat in Europe witnessed, in Dallas’s retelling, the fateful jockeying for postwar position through the movements of armies in Europe. The book casts Stalin as the villain of the piece. Charles de Gaulle, Dallas writes, would eventually learn that “a bargain with the Communist world leadership was a bargain with the devil” (p. 321). Elsewhere Dallas observes that “Stalin’s system had its prototype in Hell” (p. 270). Dallas vigorously indicts those in the United States and western Europe who, whether because of blindness, dishonesty or a desire to minimize friction in the alliance, attempted to brush under the rug the crimes committed by the Soviet regime.

The book, despite its title, is not structured as a chronology of events of the year 1945. It begins with the Battle of Berlin, but then moves back in time to 1944 and describes in some detail the liberation of Paris and the Warsaw uprising, as well as the movements of armies in 1944. It is a bit surprising to read in a book titled 1945 that August 18 and 19, 1944, represented “the moment that would determine the shape of post-war Europe” (p. xvii). After bringing the story through May 8, 1945, the work devotes comparatively little attention to the last half of the year before surveying developments in Europe during the first two decades of the cold war.

For H-German readers, the book’s treatment of German history will be of greatest interest. The crimes of the Third Reich tend to recede into the background as the story of Stalin’s war against the West takes prominence. Dallas generally finds the most important context in which to place Nazism’s genocidal war to be the world of the Stalinist system.

Throughout the work Dallas emphasizes affinities between Nazis and communists. Nazism originated “as a mutation of Bolshevism” (p. 372) and he finds that, on balance, Stalin achieved a more totalitarian control over the Soviets than Hitler managed to obtain over the Ger-
The writing appears to reflect an admirable desire to rise above the stodgy prose of many historians, but the work disappoints stylistically. Some of Dallas’s similes are more striking for their inventiveness than their ability to improve the reader’s grasp of the subject. Dallas writes, for example, “Like a wounded cat, which the westward-pointing peninsula resembled, Europe inhaled all the problems of the world, then exhaled them all out again” (p. 577). The book is also repetitive. We read, for example, a quotation from Goebbels’s diary entry of March 30, 1945, noting that he doubted the predictions of astrologers, but was willing to exploit them for their propaganda value; the same quotation is then used again a mere three pages later (pp. 364, 367). A significant portion of the book’s bulk is devoted to trivia. Dallas has an eye for irrelevant detail and the unrevealing anecdote. The reader is treated to considerable information on the weather. In a work of this size there are, perhaps inevitably, some errors. Dallas refers at one point to an “inter-ballistic missile system” (p. 606) and he dates the merger of the KPD and the SPD in the Soviet Zone to October 1945, not April 1946 (p. 591).

Perhaps because the work is intended for a general audience, Dallas does not engage extensively with the arguments of other historians concerning the origins of the cold war. A number of historians who have carefully examined the question have concluded that during the war and even through 1945 Stalin perceived potential benefits to be obtained from continued postwar cooperation with the British and the Americans.[2] Some evidence suggests that he was willing to compromise in some cases to obtain cooperation elsewhere in furthering Soviet interests, although certain points, such as the establishment of a friendly regime in Poland, were perceived as vital, non-negotiable Soviet interests.

Finally, the work is consistently weakened by a tendency to eschew nuance or qualification in favor of sweeping, provocative assertions. Dallas, for example, writes, “The war on the Eastern Front was as much a Russian civil war as it was a war between Germans and Russians” (p. 386). Here an interesting insight about the im-
The importance of divisions within Soviet society is pushed too far, because those conflicts did not rise to the level of the war of annihilation against the Soviet people launched by Hitler. Or, less importantly, but revealingly, Dallas describes Oliver Wendell Holmes as a “hero to this day of all American lawyers” (p. 413). The incontestable fact that Holmes was one of the most important and admired figures in American legal history is stretched into an assertion that is demonstrably false.

The problem extends to the crux of the book’s argument, where Dallas insists that “the idea of a ‘wartime alliance’ had been the West’s great illusion” (p. 595). Stalin’s only “genuine ally” had in fact been Hitler (p. 597). Dallas presses the point too far. The Soviets, British and Americans were divided by rivalries and conflict, but they nevertheless joined together, as allies, to fight a common enemy. Allies ought not to be confused with friends. For any readers inclined to romanticize the wartime cooperation between the victors, this book will disabuse them of that error. The book provides a thorough, grim catalog of the sufferings of Europeans in 1945, which by no means came to an end on May 8, 1945, and many of which resulted from Stalinist crimes. The insights to be gained beyond these points, however, are disappointingly modest.

Notes
