

Report and Retort: Man of Steel, Re-forged
by Geoffrey Roberts

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Andrew J. Bacevich generously praises my book, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953*, as "in many respects a model of scholarship" and as "revisionism of high order" (*The National Interest*, September/October 2007). But my "depiction of Stalin as a great statesman and man of peace" seems to have three problems: a misinterpretation of the nature of the Grand Alliance; a misunderstanding of the nature of statecraft; and an abdication of the moral obligations of historians.

According to Bacevich, I fail to see that the Grand Alliance existed only to defeat Hitler and that once that goal was achieved the wartime coalition inevitably fell apart. What Bacevich does not recognize, however, is that Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin shared a different view of the Grand Alliance. They saw it as a vehicle for postwar political cooperation and as a framework for policing a stable and secure postwar order. The failure to realize that shared vision and the rapid postwar descent into the Cold War is one of the major themes of my book. The origins of the Cold War constitute a long and complex story, but my version bears no resemblance to Bacevich's depiction of Stalin's peaceful intentions being thwarted by the British and Americans. In fact, my argument is that Stalin's pursuit of postwar ideological ambitions undermined his efforts to secure a peacetime Grand Alliance. Stalin's failings as a peacemaker are central to my analysis of the Cold War's origins. My conclusion is that the Cold War could have been averted, but only by the combined efforts of all the erstwhile allies.

Bacevich suggests that my misunderstanding of the nature of statecraft leads me to place Stalin in "the pantheon of great statesmen." Actually, I do no such thing because I do not see Stalin as a great statesman. Yet I do see Stalin as a great warlord who played a critical and indispensable role in defeating the Nazis during World War II. The case for such a conclusion is presented in my book's detailed narrative of Stalin's war leadership based on the latest evidence from the Russian archives. In telling this story I criticize the mythology about Stalin's war record

generated by the Cold War and by the de-Stalinization campaign in the USSR. The story is told largely from Stalin's perspective and that has led some readers—Bacevich included—to confuse comprehension with justification and historical empathy with political sympathy. Of course, my book also includes many positive judgments about Stalin, but embedded in my narrative are many criticisms of his war leadership. It seems that Bacevich can't see beyond the positives and grasp that the book is the beginning of a new critique of Stalin's war leadership—a more robust critique that measures up to the evidence.

Bacevich wants to judge Stalin by the consequences of his military success and states that

Stalin's legacy was almost entirely negative. The victory he engineered over Hitler cost the Soviet people dearly both in human costs and resources. Beyond survival, it yielded few tangible benefits. Moscow gained an empire but it proved almost worthless. . . . The collapse of the Soviet Union itself . . . stands as the ultimate verdict on Stalin's achievements as a statesman.

Certainly, the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany was excessively costly in human terms and could have been won by Stalin with fewer mistakes, better decisions and less ruthlessness in relation to his own people—particularly during the early years of the war. But we should be under no illusion that any victory over such an enemy could have been anything less than brutal. Forced to choose between Stalin's victory—warts and all—and a Nazi empire in Europe that would have enslaved the Slavs and completed the extermination of the Jews, I have no hesitation in giving credit to the Soviet dictator, while at the same time regretting the deaths of his millions of innocent victims. I agree that the collapse of the USSR represents the ultimate verdict on the failure of Soviet socialism, but what happened between 1945 and 1991 cannot be easily dismissed. The empire won by Stalin provided the foundation for the USSR's rise to superpower status, with the capacity to play a central role in world politics for some forty years. This result of the war was certainly not seen as inconsequential at the time and, even today, tens of millions of Russians yearn for a return to an era which, according to Bacevich, "yielded few tangible benefits."

Bacevich states that the moral obligation of historians is "to render unambiguous judgments, discriminating right from wrong." I am deemed to fail this test because I "tacitly" issue Stalin "a moral waiver." This point is linked to the criticism that while my book recognizes and notes Stalin's crimes, it does so only to dismiss them as unimportant. Actually, I do not

dismiss Stalin's crimes, which is why I go to such trouble to summarize the repression, terror and brutality of his regime. My summaries are based on extensive research, including reading of the primary documentation. But mass murder is not the whole story of Stalin's regime. If that were the case it would be impossible to explain either the functioning or the long-term survival of the USSR, not least its victory in World War II. In the preface to the book I quote with approval Robert H. McNeal's argument that there is no point

in trying to rehabilitate Stalin. The established impression that he slaughtered, tortured, imprisoned and oppressed on a grand scale is not in error. On the other hand, it is impossible to understand this immensely gifted politician by attributing solely to him all the crimes and suffering of his era or to conceive him simply as a monster and a mental case.

I stand by that argument and see my moral obligation as a historian to tell the truth, even if that means painting a complex picture of a past that does not fit easily into a Manichean universe in which there is only good and evil.

Bacevich worries that my kind of history opens the door to a pernicious revisionism in which not just Stalin but Mao and even Hitler are rehabilitated. I do not support the rehabilitation of Mao, Hitler or Stalin, but Bacevich's preferred tactic of simply condemning "evil" will not stop those who would wish otherwise. Only the historical truth can protect us from the distortion of the past in the pursuit of contemporary political purposes. Surely, that is a lesson of history that we can all agree on.

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