

Geoffrey Roberts: Interview with Facundo Garcia (Pagina/12), August 2021

Question: Could you tell us how you got started in the study of Stalin's library? I know that you were a Marxist, but I am interested in how you came to be interested in the most controversial figure of Marxism worldwide.

Answer: Stalin is the towering figure of Soviet history, more so than ever nearly 70 years after his death. You can't understand the history of the failed Soviet experiment in the construction of a communist utopia without reference to Stalin – his beliefs, calculations, feelings, actions and impacts.

Stalin lived most of his life publicly. He was a politically driven personality, someone whose inner mental life was shaped by his public persona and by the ideological universe he inhabited. Stalin's personality was constructed from the outside in and was moulded and driven by the politics of a ruthless class war in defence of the revolution and the pursuit of communist cause.

At the same time, Stalin lived in his own private mental world and his personal book collection gives us some access to his innermost thinking. It opens a window to his true self.

Most of what we know about Stalin's private thinking comes from his public actions and utterances, including his performances in interactions with his closest comrades. Now, there is an element of performance about the way Stalin reads, marks and writes in his library's books but mostly it is spontaneous and expressive of an intellectual who was immersed in a world of ideas.

Stalin cared about ideas more than anything else and believed in the power of words to shape people's consciousness and action. Books, after all, had liberated him from his lowly Georgian Orthodox Christian background and turned him into a revolutionary intent not just on changing the world but human nature itself.

Question: How is the site where the books in Stalin's library are located? What did you feel when you got there?

Answer: At the core of my research is a study about 400 books, pamphlets and periodicals that Stalin marked and wrote in, so we know that he read them, some of them in great detail. These books are located in the Moscow archive – RGASPI is the Russian acronym – which houses Stalin's private archives.

Working in the Russian archives is always a great thrill, especially when Stalin enters the picture, which he does frequently.

The most interesting thing to me about Stalin's book collection was how familiar it felt. It is a Marxist's library and I had a similar one in the 1970s and 1980s. Many of the subjects that interested Stalin interested me, too – the Marxist canon, political economy, dialectical materialism, the history of the left and revolutionary movements etc. Many of the obscure – and often boring! - debates with Marxism that galvanised Stalin's attention were highly familiar to me. That made the research task a lot easier.

Question: Because of your research, I have learned that Stalin's library - or at least what remains of it - seems to be oriented towards "functionality". But at the same time, we know that Stalin wrote and published poetry in his youth. Did you find any vestige of that poetic and "romantic" era?

Answer: As far as we know, Stalin never wrote any poetry as an adult. But he remained highly interested in literature of all kinds. He took a close interest in the Stalin Prizes for Literature and always said that to get a good political education you need to read both the Marxist classics and the classics of world literature.

Stalin's personal library contained thousands of novels, plays and poetry collections. Unfortunately, we don't know the details because these books were dispersed to other libraries after his death in 1953

But there is also a sense in which Stalin remained a poet all his life. As a speaker and writer he used simple, immediately understandable language and he used it *intensively*. His prose has a poetic quality. I'm not saying it was great poetry, but it certainly beguiled many great intellectuals and artists. For example, Ernest Fischer, the Austrian Marxist and art historian described Stalin as the master of simplicity with a knack for allying sharp critical reasoning with the imperative of action.

Question: Empathy should not be confused with sympathy, that is clear. However, your effort to empathize with Stalin must have involved an effort. What was the hardest part of that process? What are the characteristics of Stalin that are further from your personality?

Answer: That is a very interesting question!

As a young man I shared Stalin's idealism and utopianism so we have that much in common. I also like to think of myself as a practical and pragmatic intellectual, as did Stalin. But I was never an ideological fanatic or a dogmatist. My convictions were strong but weakly held! Stalin never had doubts about anything.

As a political activist I was committed to a peaceful, democratic road to socialism. I abhor violence and never believed that people could or should be coerced into being socialists. To my mind, violence is only justified in war. As you know, I have written a book extolling Stalin's virtues as a war leader. But while harsh decisions and action and great sacrifices were necessary to defeat Hitler and Nazism Stalin went too far in the violent coercion of his own people. That kind of extremism was true of many aspects of Stalin's rule, not least during the collectivisation of Soviet agriculture and the great terror of the 1930s, which victimised Soviet citizens who were mostly loyal.

Having said that, my life, experience and situation has been radically different to Stalin's. In other circumstances maybe I would have had different attitudes and feelings, in relation to the question of political violence, for example.

Question: Is there any reference to South America in Stalin's library? And if so, did he make any comment?

Answer: Stalin was an internationalist who believed in the spread of revolution across the whole. He was interested in the history and experience of revolutionary movements in many different countries. There is only one book in his library about Latin America – a history of the Mexican revolution by a Russian author – but the catalogue is far from complete so there may have been other texts. You also have to remember that Stalin was reliant on translations into Russian (or Georgian) and I don't think there was much such literature on South America in his day. It was only after Stalin's death that the Soviets became interested in your part of the world in a big way. Stalin certainly knew about the Monroe Doctrine and was fond of referencing it to US officials when they complained about the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. He also used the example of the Panama Canal to claim special rights in relation to Turkey's control over the Dardanelles and access to the Black Sea, which he considered to be primarily a Soviet sea.

Stalin, of course, knew about Pablo Neruda, who was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize in 1953, and may well have read his "Canto a Stalingrado" (1942) and "Nuevo canto de amor a Stalingrado" (1943). When Stalin died Neruda wrote an ode to him, which upset many people in retrospect but at the time the dictator was still a great war hero and an icon of the peace movement. It was only when Khrushchev denounced Stalin's mass terror in 1956 that the dictator was discredited. Ironically, only after the fall of communism in 1991 was Stalin partially rehabilitated as a historical figure. In contemporary Russia more Russians have a favourable opinion of Stalin than those who do not.

By the way, the Soviets were not great fans of Argentina's neutrality during the Second World War, which they thought favoured the Nazis and the Fascists.

Moscow opposed Argentinian membership of the United Nations because it feared Argentina would become part of a US-led Latin American bloc in the UN but it was overruled at the UN's founding conference in San Francisco in 1945.

Question: What was the strangest book you found in Stalin's library?

Answer: A 1945 Soviet textbook on the constitutional law of different western countries. Stalin was fascinated by the separation of powers in the United States and the different roles of Congress, the President and the Supreme Court. A strange interest for a dictator who presided over a one-party system in which the communist party dominated civil society and well as the state and the public sphere.

Question: And the strangest comment?

Answer: Stalin liked to read and mark up passages his own writings, almost as if he were refreshing his memory of his past thoughts and formulations. Just after the Second World War the first volumes of his collected works were published. These dealt with his early years in the Bolshevik Party. It is evident from his annotations of these volumes that he was still heavily invested – emotionally and intellectually – with ancient factional debates within the party.

A great deal of Stalin's reading focussed on the lessons of history and he spent much of his life either living in the past or projecting forward into the future. You could say – to use modern parlance – that Stalin lacked mindfulness, an absence which functioned to shield him from the realities and brutalities of his regime.

Question: We know that Stalin read his political opponents and one tends to think that those books must be specially intervened by his pen. Is it like that? The books of Trotsky, for example, are they scrawled?

Answer: The interesting thing is that even when reading the works of his opponents Stalin read to learn from them as well as to arm himself against their arguments. Sure, their writings are splattered with Stalin's abuse but also more considered responses. Stalin's dialogue with them is by no means completely negative. By far the most frequent of Stalin's marginal annotations is NB.

In the case of Trotsky there are several books of his in the surviving remnants of Stalin's library and there may well have been more on his bookshelves that we don't know about. The books of Trotsky's that Stalin annotated date from the early 1920s i.e. from before the two men fell out. Stalin read these books with great interest and, for the most part, with approval. The most frequent marginal comment by Stalin in Trotsky's *Terrorism and Communism* – which was a refutation of Karl Kautsky's critique of the 'Red Terror' during the Russian civil war – is 'metko' –which means 'spot on'.

Question: You usually insist that Stalin was not a monster or a psychopath, but an intellectual who applied his theories in a punctilious way. That is to say that he went from abstraction to facts without too many moral questions. What lessons could be learned from this aspect of Stalin's personality? Do you see any warning about the present?

Answer: In my book *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953*, I wrote:

“the lesson of Stalin's rule is not a simple morality tale about a paranoid, vengeful and bloodthirsty dictator. It is a story of a powerful politics and ideology that strove for both utopian and totalitarian ends. Stalin was an

idealist prepared to use whatever violence it took to impose his will and achieve his goals.”

That remains my assessment.

Question: Is there a book of yours where we can know more about Stalin's library?

Answer: The only author (in English) to make extensive use of the materials in Stalin's personal library is Erik van Ree who wrote a book called *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin*, which is a very interesting text indeed.

I am writing my own book about Stalin's personal library, which I hope will be published in the not too distant future. My books have been translated into many languages but not Spanish. I would be delighted if the Stalin's library was the first of my books to appear in Spanish.