

Geoffrey Roberts

## **Stalin, Spain and the Second World War**

Interview with 20 Minutos about the Spain edition of *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953*

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<https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/5099518/0/geoffrey-roberts-historiador-putin-es-mucho-mas-pragmatico-en-politica-que-stalin-que-era-un-fanatico-ideologico/>

*This Spanish edition of your book begins with an introduction where you write about Stalin's role in the Spanish Civil War. In it, you reaffirm the personal and political interest of the Soviet leader in helping the Republic militarily, Where do you think Stalin's interest in the civil war came from, was it purely geostrategic?*

The prevailing narratives about Stalin and the Spanish civil war are mostly negative. Some people argue his goal was to capture Spain for communism, while others contend he betrayed the Spanish revolution to suit Soviet state interests and Moscow's relations with other great powers.

What I try to show - in a specially written addition to the Spanish edition of my book - is that there was an authentic core of internationalism and anti-fascism at play in Stalin's intervention in Spain. It was Stalin who initiated Soviet military supplies to Spain and drove that aid programme forward. He devoted more time to Spain than any other international issue. The Spanish ambassador in Moscow, Marcelino Pascua, had far more access to Stalin than any other foreign diplomat.

Certainly, the geopolitics of the Spanish civil war was central to Stalin's concerns – he supported Republican Spain as part of his power struggle with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy – but his interest was also driven by his socialist internationalist ideology.

*Was this Soviet role comparable to the help of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy to the Francoist side?*

The Soviet Union provided a great deal of material aid to Republican Spain and also sent a couple of thousand military advisors, many of whom were killed in action. But Hitler's and Mussolini's aid to Franco was far greater, including the provision of a large numbers of

troops. That was why the Soviets continued to participate in the International Non-Intervention Committee established by Britain and France, their aim being to restrict German and Italian supplies. These Soviet efforts eventually paid off – in 1938 agreement was reached on the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Spain - but by that time it was too late – the civil war had swung decisively in Franco's favour.

*You also explain that the paranoia and fear of Fifth Columnists in Spain, infected the USSR and influenced the purges of the Great Terror, was it like exactly that?*

The concept of groups of secret sympathisers of an enemy spying and sabotaging behind the frontline was not a Spanish invention! It is a phenomenon typical of civil wars, including the Russian civil war, but events in Spain gave this activity a striking name, which soon spread into Soviet political discourse. It also provided Stalin and the Soviets with a case-study of what might happen to the USSR in the event of war.

The outbreak of the Spanish civil war had a big impact on the development of Stalin's Great Terror. It was no coincidence that the peak of this terror coincided with the early years of the civil war. And, as I also point out, Stalin's hunt for the enemy within at home was extended to the Republican camp within Spain. This was very damaging to the Republican cause.

*How did the civil war influence Stalin's military and political thought?*

What struck me when I looked at Stalin's role in relation to Spain was the extent to which it was a dress rehearsal for his role as Soviet Supreme Commander during the Great Patriotic War. The centrality of Stalin to every dimension of the Soviet war effort, his immense attention to detail and his well-informed interest in military matters – all this was prefigured by his activities during the Spanish civil war. Because of Spain, Stalin re-learned a lesson the Russian civil war had taught him - the supreme importance of maintaining military discipline and the utility of ruthless suppression of any challenges to his authority.

*Your assessment of Stalin's leadership is that, after the bad press in the West and in the USSR itself after his death in 1953, a great military leader and an impressive politician was hidden from history. Is it impossible, even in the 21st century, to draw a multi-dimensional and objective profile of him?*

That is precisely what I try to do in my book. It is possible to do that for two reasons. Firstly, the passing of time provides more perspective through which to judge Stalin as a war leader. Secondly, we now have access to the documentary records that allow us to reveal the real Stalin and dispell the misinformation and mythology that surrounds him and

his era. *Stalin's Wars* is based on thousands of documents published from the Russian archives and on extensive direct access to the archives, including his personal file series.

Paradoxically, a rounded, evidence-based portrayal of Stalin only became possible because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to the opening of the Russian archives. It also opened up discussion about Stalin in Russia itself – a much healthier situation than in Soviet times when there was a prescribed party line about what could and could not be said about him. I'm happy to report that much of my own work has been translated into Russian and is part of that discussion.

*His great value in World War II was to rise from the first setback against Germany and reorganize a country and a huge army to defeat Nazism?*

Yes, that is what most impressed me about Stalin: how he dealt with defeat during the first couple of years of the war. Also, how he learnt from his mistakes and reconstructed the Soviet military-political leadership, and, indeed, his whole system, into a highly effective war machine.

The Red Army's defeat of Hitler's Nazi legions was the greatest ever feat of arms, and Stalin was indispensable to that historic victory. It was Stalin and the Soviets who saved the world from Nazi barbarism and genocide. While this was, indeed, a victory for a communist authoritarian state, it also kept alive the democratic option – it saved the world for democracy, as I have somewhat controversially put it.

*What was his great success during that war? And his biggest mistake?*

His biggest mistake was allowing himself to be persuaded by his generals that Soviet defences would hold when the Germans attacked and this would buy time to prepare and launch counter-offensives by the Red Army. Actually, those defences quickly crumbled under the weight of the German attack and the Red Army's counter-offensives were a disaster. It was this fundamental miscalculation by Stalin and his generals that largely explains the great Soviet losses during the first few months of the war.

His greatest success was staying in Moscow in October 1941, when the Germans had reached the outskirts of the city. Stalin's presence in the Soviet capital steadied nerves, bolstered morale, and bought time to train and deploy the reserve armies that would launch a successful counter-offensive in front of Moscow in early December 1941. A close second great success was Stalin taking the advice of his generals and drawing the Germans into an attrition battle in Stalingrad as a prelude to a great encirclement operation that destroyed Hitler's 1942 advance south towards the oil fields of Baku.

*Did Stalin really try to avoid the Cold War?*

Yes, he really did. Stalin wanted to continue the wartime grand alliance with Britain and the United States, not least as a means for the long-term containment of Germany, a country that he feared would rise again to threaten world peace. Stalin also had ideological ambitions – the spread of communism globally. But he saw this as a long-term process of historical change and thought he could balance peaceful co-existence with the West and his socialist aspirations. The trouble was that the West had its own ideological ambitions – the spread of what we now call neoliberal capitalist democracy – and these clashed with Stalin's goals. Both sides came to see each other as existentially threatening to their systems. Hence the cold war and its mutually interlocking threat perceptions, its spiralling arms race and its proxy wars that killed millions of people in Korea, Vietnam and many other countries.

Both sides were culpable for the cold war but Stalin was far less enthusiastic about engaging in that struggle at least initially. The war had shown him the benefits of cooperation with the West and he had hoped the collaboration could continue. There is no Stalin equivalent of Churchill's 'iron curtain' speech of 1946 or of Truman's call for global defence of the 'free world' in 1947, unless you count his riposte that Churchill was a warmonger. Even so, he remained on good personal terms with Churchill.

*Today, 70 years later, we still await the formal end of the frozen war on the Korean peninsula... why was that war Stalin's last big failure?*

Stalin allowed North Korea's Kim Il-Sung to talk him into an invasion of South Korea. Kim assured him it would be an easy war and would be welcomed by a popular uprising in the south. Kim might have been right, except for the US-led intervention in the war, which surprised Stalin and forced him to expand the war by involving Communist China. Subsequently, Stalin under-estimated western resolve and allowed the war to drag on for far too long. There is a certain parallel here with Putin and the Ukraine war and a lot of talk about a Korean-style resolution of the conflict i.e. a ceasefire but no peace treaty.

*Since you have raised this issue, how would you compare Stalin and Putin as warlords.*

It's far too early to say. Depends on the outcome of the war. If Putin achieves some kind of meaningful victory then there will be those who will want to place him in the pantheon of great Russian warlords, though not on the same level as Stalin.

I don't think Putin is anywhere near as actively involved in directing military operations as Stalin was. Putin has established a similar war mobilisation structure to that created by Stalin but is much more inclined to delegate and devolve power.

There is one striking way in which Putin and Stalin are quite similar. Like Stalin, Putin sees himself as a patriotic leader of a multinational state and is wary of over-stoking the flames of ethnic Russian nationalism, though that is certainly playing a critical role in the current conflict, as it did during the Great Patriotic War.

More generally, I have recently published a new book – which I hope will soon appear in Spanish! - that may shed some light on the Putin-Stalin comparison. Its called *Stalin's Library: A Dictator and His Books*. Its about Stalin as an intellectual, a reader and a collector of books.

Putin certainly reads a lot and is interested in ideas, but I'm not sure he is an intellectual like Stalin, someone who believed in the power of books to radically change human lives. Putin is much more practical and pragmatic about politics than Stalin, who was an ideological fanatic.

As far as I know, Putin hasn't said much about Stalin since the beginning of the Ukraine war. However, on the eve of the Russian invasion he did criticise Stalin for failing to anticipate the German invasion in summer 1941, the result being massive Soviet losses.

Putin used this historical reference to rationalise the invasion as a preventative war to stop Ukraine getting – with NATO's help – so strong that it would risk attacking Russia to regain its lost territories in Crimea and the Donbass.

That was the wrong lesson. Stalin's error in 1941 was not being taken by surprise, it was over-estimating his own forces and under-estimating those of the enemy. Stalin learned from this mistake but that did not stop him from repeating it during the Korean War.

Stalin was undoubtedly a great warlord but a far from perfect one.