



Consortium News

Independent Investigative Journalism and Political Review - Since 1995

consortiumnews.com

CN LIVE

Robert Parry 1949-2018

Volume 28, Number 196 — Friday, July 21, 2023

COMMENTARY, EUROPE, FRANCE, GERMANY, NATO, RUSSIA, SOVIET UNION, UKRAINE, UNTIL THIS DAY--HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEWS

From Stalinism to the 'Most Avoidable War in History'

July 21, 2023



Natylie Baldwin interviews Soviet and Russian specialist Geoffrey Roberts on Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, Europe's role, Stalin and World War II.

Russian President Vladimir Putin in February, at a World War II memorial in Moscow.

(President of Russia)

By **Natylie Baldwin**

Special to Consortium News

Geoffrey Roberts is an historian, biographer and political commentator. A renowned specialist in Russian and Soviet foreign and military policy and an expert on Stalin and the Second World War, his books have been translated into numerous languages. He is emeritus professor of history at University College Cork and a member of the Royal Irish Academy.

Translate »



Natalie Baldwin: How did you become interested in the Soviet Union and Russia?

Geoffrey Roberts: Mainly, it was a political interest in the Soviet socialist system. As a teenager I was enthused by the

Prague Spring and [Alexander] Dubcek's vision of socialism with a human face. Together with others, I studied the Soviet system for lessons — positive and negative — that could inform the achievement and building of socialism in my own country and elsewhere in the world.

I studied international relations as an undergraduate and that led to specialization in Soviet foreign policy but I have always been interested in all aspects of Soviet history. People assume I'm a Russophile, which I'm not (though I do have many Russian friends) — only in recent years have I become more interested in pre-revolutionary Russian history.

Baldwin: A big part of your specialty is Joseph Stalin as well as World War II. What made you focus on Stalin and what is the most interesting thing you learned about him?

Roberts: When I started studying Soviet history I wasn't much interested in Stalin as an individual. I thought his Marxism was mechanistic, crude and dogmatic. I agreed with Nikita Khrushchev's critique of his dictatorial rule at the 20th Party Congress.

What interested me was not Stalin but "Stalinism" — the political, ideological and economic functioning of the Soviet system. In that regard, I was unconvinced by Khrushchev's explanation of Stalinism as a function of the cult of Stalin's personality. It seemed to me that the mass repressions of the 1930s and 1940s and the ongoing authoritarianism of the Soviet system — softer though it was after Stalin's death — were the result of the collective failings and defects of the party and its ideology.

When I started to research Soviet foreign relations, I focused on policy, and on personalities other than Stalin, such as his foreign commissar, Maxim Litvinov. Only when I began working in the Russian archives in the mid-1990s did my attention switch to Stalin. What those archives revealed to me was how pervasive, detailed and dominant was Stalin's leadership and decision-making. Given the dictatorial nature of Stalin's regime, that was not so surprising, but now I could follow its day-to-day operation. Above all, the archives showed that Stalin was a formidable administrator who was able to absorb and process huge amounts of information. His decision-making was often inefficient but invariably effective in achieving his key goals.

The Soviet system was created by Stalin and it endured for many decades after his death. It had many defects but, after a fashion, it worked, not least during the crucible of total war with Nazi Germany.

Baldwin: One of your books is *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War*. After making profound errors of judgment in the runup to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, which led to horrible losses in the first weeks, you detail how Stalin worked hard to learn from his mistakes and ultimately became — you argue — the most important military strategist of the war in terms of defeating the Germans. Can you discuss this aspect of Stalin as well as how the war affected the Soviet Union in general and why it still has resonance for Russia?

Roberts: Stalin remains a hugely popular historical figure in post-Soviet Russia and in many other parts of the former U.S.S.R., such as his native Georgia. His popularity rests on his perceived role in winning the Second World War. In my book I argued that

Stalin was indispensable to the Soviet war effort — it was his system and could only function effectively if he performed well — that without his warlord-ship Hitler and the Nazis might well have won. Somewhat provocatively, I claimed it was Stalin who saved the world for democracy, albeit at the expense of half of Europe being subordinated to his authoritarian rule.

When the war ended in 1945, Stalin was almost universally hailed as the key architect of the allied victory over Nazi Germany. Not until Khrushchev's attack on Stalin in 1956 was that positive verdict seriously questioned. Central to Khrushchev's critique of the dictator was the poor quality of Stalin's military leadership. While some of Khrushchev's criticisms were valid, others obscured the extent to which the mistakes of the early war years were a collective failure, including on the part of Khrushchev himself.

With access to Russian archives, I was able to re-evaluate Khrushchev's critique and demonstrate that Stalin was a highly effective war leader — a leader who learnt from and corrected his mistakes.

World War II was the central event in Soviet history. At stake in the conflict was not only the survival of Soviet socialism but the continued existence of the multinational state the Bolsheviks had inherited from the Tsars. Had Hitler won, European Russia would have become a German colony and what was left of the Soviet Union a fragmented, disintegrating state. That historical spectre has particular resonance at the present time when many Russians see their country as once again involved in an existential struggle for survival.

Baldwin: In a recent interview with Glenn Diesen and Alexander Mercouris, you said that Stalin committed the crimes he did largely due to his being such a true believer in his communist ideology and was very convinced of the rightness of his actions to further this ideology. This fits in with an observation I've made over the years (and I'm sure I'm not the only one) that the most dangerous people are those who are the most self-righteous, whether

it's on behalf of a religion or political philosophy, because they can justify the use of any means or methods in pursuit of their righteous ends. What do you think? Do you think policymakers in Washington suffer from a similarly dangerous sense of self-righteousness regarding their exceptionalism?

Roberts: The most important thing to understand about Stalin is that he was an intellectual, driven by his Marxist ideas, a true believer in his communist ideology. And he didn't just believe it, he felt it. Socialism was an emotional thing for Stalin. His often-monstrous actions stemmed from his politics and ideology, not his personality.

Josef Stalin, 1949. (Bundesarchiv, Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 3.0)

But the mass violence and repression of the Stalin era is not the whole of the Soviet story. Soviet society embodied many laudable ideas and aspirations — egalitarianism, multiculturalism, internationalism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism, above all the valorization of peace and peaceful co-existence between different peoples, systems and values. The U.S.S.R. inspired a great deal of idealism and popular support throughout its existence, notwithstanding the millions of innocent people who fell victim to Stalin's fanatical determination to defend the Soviet system against its enemies.

I agree with you about the dangerous self-righteousness of Western policymakers. But what really worries me is that they lack Stalin's sense of realism and pragmatism and his ability to grasp the reality beyond his own ideological preferences. Thankfully, the same is not true of President Vladimir Putin, himself a product of the Soviet system, and an inheritor of its tradition of adapting political ideology to the contingencies and exigencies of the real situation.

Baldwin: Given your work in analyzing and attempting to understand Stalin

as a political leader, military strategist and as an intellectual, I wouldn't be surprised if you get accused of being a Stalin apologist. If so, what is your response?

Roberts: No one who reads my

work with any degree of care would give any credence to such an accusation.

As a historian my primary task is to understand and explain Stalin, not to condemn or justify him. I do that by striving to see the world through his eyes, which, admittedly, requires a high degree of empathy, but which is not to be confused with sympathy. As a colleague of mine, Mark Harrison, once said, there is no moral hazard in trying to understand Stalin and having gained greater understanding, you can condemn him even more if you want to. But let's get the history right before rushing to judgement.

One or two reviewers of my latest book — *Stalin's Library* — complained that by presenting him as an avid reader and as a serious intellectual, I whitewashed his dictatorship. All I can say is that they must not have noticed the book's sub-title — *A Dictator and His Books* — or its first sentence — “this book explores the intellectual life and biography of one of history's bloodiest dictators” — or the title of Chapter One — “Bloody Tyrant and Bookworm” — or, indeed, a whole section devoted to “Stalin's Terror” — a topic on which I published yet another article about just recently.

Baldwin: I want to shift gears to current events. You've done a remarkable job documenting exactly how events must have looked to Putin in the leadup to February of 2022, including Putin's numerous public comments about the growing dangers of NATO expansion, de facto NATO membership for Ukraine, and the possible stationing of offensive missiles in Ukraine.

One of the things I really wanted to hash out with you regards an indirect sort of debate you had recently with Ray McGovern over whether Putin had other options he could have pursued instead of invading Ukraine in February 2022.

McGovern tends to agree with John Mearsheimer that Putin did not have any other realistic options to defend Russian security interests. You wrote in response that you think this was a war of choice and not necessity by Putin.

At the time Putin invaded, I believed Putin did have other options such as those outlined by Russia expert Patrick Armstrong in his article of December 2021. Those options included positioning nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad and Belarus to show resolve in defending Russia against NATO-aligned mischief, and/or economic measures that would punish NATO-aligned nations, among other things.

In retrospect, I don't think any of these alternative measures would have worked. We've seen how the U.S. and virtually all of Europe has gone along with policies that have hurt their own interests both economically and in terms of security, particularly Europe. We've also seen how the West is willing to escalate this conflict. I hate this war as much as anyone, but I also have to be honest at this point — it now seems implausible that Putin stopping gas deliveries to Europe or stationing nukes in Belarus or trying to appeal more to Europe would have deterred Washington/NATO in any meaningful way.

Also, [former Ukraine President Petro] Poroshenko, [former German Chancellor Angela] Merkel and [former French President Francois] Hollande have all since admitted that they had essentially taken Russia for a ride with the Minsk Agreements which they used as a cover to build up Ukraine's military.

[Related: SCOTT RITTER: Merkel Reveals West's Duplicity and PATRICK LAWRENCE: Germany & the Lies of Empire]

It seems like some in the West wanted this conflict or at the very least they didn't have a problem once it started given their rejection of several attempts at negotiating an end to it. Can you give some concrete options that Putin had that were realistic at all, given what he was dealing with from the

West? And please feel free to respond to any part of what I just laid out.

October 2015 in Paris; seated at table from left: Germany's Angela Merkel, Russia's Vladimir Putin, Ukraine's Petro Poroshenko and France's Francois Holland during Normandy format talks to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine. (Kremlin.ru, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

Roberts: My agreement with Ray McGovern and John Mearsheimer is far greater than any particular differences of interpretation.

The most important point about the Russia-Ukraine war is that it was the most avoidable war in history. It could have been avoided by Ukraine implementing the Minsk agreements. It could have been avoided by NATO halting its build-up of Ukraine's armed forces. It could have been avoided by a positive U.S. response to Putin's common security proposals of December 2021. Putin pulled the trigger but it was Ukraine and the West that loaded the gun.

[Related: *The War in Ukraine Was Provoked* and *John Pilger: War in Europe & the Rise of Raw Propaganda* and *Ukraine Crisis Should Have Been Avoided*]

When the West stonewalled his security proposals, Putin had a choice — continue with what I call his militarised diplomacy, or take military action to force acceptance of his demands. He chose war because diplomacy didn't seem to be working and because he thought it was better to fight now rather than later — hence my characterisation of the invasion decision as a choice for preventative war.

I disagreed with his decision for three reasons: (1) notwithstanding Ukraine's progressive military build-up, a dire existential threat to Russia was emergent rather than imminent; (2) the chance of diplomacy succeeding was slim but

not non-existent; and (3) going to war was an enormously dangerous and destructive step to take, not just for Russia and Ukraine but for Europe and the rest of the world.

In retrospect, it seems clear that Putin's decision for war was also based on a series of miscalculations. He over-estimated the power and efficacy of his armed forces, under-estimated Ukraine's fighting ability, and, crucially, did not anticipate the determination and recklessness of the Western proxy war on Russia.

Had the Istanbul peace negotiations succeeded and war come to an end in spring 2022, those who argue Putin's decision for war was right at the time he took it, would have a much stronger case to argue. But the prolonged nature of the war, the extent of its death and devastation, the real and continuing threat of nuclear catastrophe, and the prospect of an endless conflict, leave me unconvinced that it was the right thing to do.

It is highly likely Russia will in due course secure a decisive military advantage that will enable Putin to credibly claim victory. But it remains to be seen whether or not what Russia gains will have been worth the cost it will have paid.

Baldwin: Why do you think European leaders refuse to stand up to Washington's reckless actions in terms of scuttling negotiations to end this war much earlier and continuing to escalate the conflict using a frog-in-boiling-water approach? European leaders must know that if this conflict continues to escalate, they will be potential targets.

Roberts: It's mind-boggling! Presumably, they feel the Russian threat is so great and their dependence on U.S. protection so deep, that these are risks worth taking. But I hope the scales will fall from their eyes and they will see that the Ukrainians are fighting a losing war of attrition that may end in complete catastrophe for their country.

To be fair, there are realist and pragmatic politicians in all European countries who desire a ceasefire and are prepared to negotiate a compromise peace with Russia. I'm sure their voices will become louder and more persistent in the coming months.

Baldwin: In a similar vein, a recent survey of European opinion revealed that, though they currently view Russia as a rival, once the war ends most European citizens want to reconcile and partner with Russia. It seems that regular Europeans realize that you can't change geography and that Russia is a European neighbor and a *modus vivendi* must somehow be reached. When do you think the leaders of Europe might catch up to this realization?

Roberts: The commonsense of the European public is right. There can be no peace and prosperity in Europe without a partnership with Russia. None of the world's most pressing problems can be resolved without Russian participation.

The sooner this war ends the better it will be for Europe, for Russia and, above all, for Ukraine.

Natylie Baldwin is the author of *The View from Moscow: Understanding Russia and U.S.-Russia Relations*. Her writing has appeared in various publications including *The Grayzone*, *Antiwar.com*, *Covert Action Magazine*, *RT*, *OpEd News*, *The Globe Post*, *The New York Journal of Books* and *Dissident Voice*.

Views expressed in this interview may or may not reflect those of Consortium News.

 Post Views: 7,347

Tags: [20th Party Congress](#) [Geoffrey Roberts](#) [John Mearsheimer](#) [Joseph Stalin](#) [Minsk Accords](#)

[Natylie Baldwin](#) [Nikita Khrushchev](#) [Ray McGovern](#) [Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) [World War II](#)

Show Comments

SEARCH THIS SITE

Search

Securely by check, credit card or on Patreon:

TAX-DEDUCTIBLE

Make your tax-deductible donation by clicking [here](#).

Keep *Consortium News* going in the tradition of Bob Parry. Become a *Consortium News* [member!](#)

[Watch](#) ***Consortium News Live!***

SUBSCRIBE TO OUR FREE EMAIL NEWSLETTER

Sign Up!

Publisher

Consortium for

Independent Journalism, Inc.

Board of Directors

Diane Duston, *President*

Chris Hedges

Diana Johnstone

Margaret Kimberley

John Kiriakou

Garland Nixon

John Pilger

Gareth Porter

Julie Bergman Sender

Jill Stein

Sen. Mike Gravel

In Memoriam

Editorial Dept.

Joe Lauria

Editor-in-Chief

Corinna Barnard

Deputy Editor

Administration

Michele Steinberg

Administrative Director

Dino Zonic

Promotions

CN Live!

Cathy Vogan

Executive Producer

Elizabeth Vos

Joe Lauria

John Kiriakou

Co-Hosts

MARTHA GELLHORN PRIZE

WINNER OF THE 2017 MARTHA GELLHORN PRIZE FOR JOURNALISM

In Memoriam:Robert Parry, 1949-2018

WINNER OF THE 2015 I.F. STONE MEDAL FROM HARVARD'S NIEMAN FOUNDATION

AMERICAN DISPATCHES: COLLECTED JOURNALISM OF ROBERT PARRY

ARCHIVES

- [July 2023](#)
- [June 2023](#)
- [May 2023](#)
- [April 2023](#)
- [March 2023](#)
- [February 2023](#)
- [January 2023](#)
- [December 2022](#)
- [November 2022](#)
- [October 2022](#)
- [September 2022](#)
- [August 2022](#)
- [July 2022](#)
- [June 2022](#)
- [May 2022](#)
- [April 2022](#)
- [March 2022](#)
- [February 2022](#)
- [January 2022](#)
- [December 2021](#)
- [November 2021](#)
- [October 2021](#)
- [September 2021](#)
- [August 2021](#)
- [July 2021](#)
- [June 2021](#)
- [May 2021](#)
- [April 2021](#)
- [March 2021](#)
- [February 2021](#)
- [January 2021](#)
- [December 2020](#)
- [November 2020](#)
- [October 2020](#)
- [September 2020](#)
- [August 2020](#)
- [July 2020](#)

- June 2020
- May 2020
- April 2020
- March 2020
- February 2020
- January 2020
- December 2019
- November 2019
- October 2019
- September 2019
- August 2019
- July 2019
- June 2019
- May 2019
- April 2019
- March 2019
- February 2019
- January 2019
- December 2018
- November 2018
- October 2018
- September 2018
- August 2018
- July 2018
- June 2018
- May 2018
- April 2018
- March 2018
- February 2018
- January 2018
- December 2017
- November 2017
- October 2017
- September 2017
- August 2017
- July 2017
- June 2017
- May 2017
- April 2017
- March 2017
- February 2017
- January 2017

- December 2016
- November 2016
- October 2016
- September 2016
- August 2016
- July 2016
- June 2016
- May 2016
- April 2016
- March 2016
- February 2016
- January 2016
- December 2015
- November 2015
- October 2015
- September 2015
- August 2015
- July 2015
- June 2015
- May 2015
- April 2015
- March 2015
- February 2015
- January 2015
- December 2014
- November 2014
- October 2014
- September 2014
- August 2014
- July 2014
- June 2014
- May 2014
- April 2014
- March 2014
- February 2014
- January 2014
- December 2013
- November 2013
- October 2013
- September 2013
- August 2013
- July 2013

- [June 2013](#)
- [May 2013](#)
- [April 2013](#)
- [March 2013](#)
- [February 2013](#)
- [January 2013](#)
- [December 2012](#)
- [November 2012](#)
- [October 2012](#)
- [September 2012](#)
- [August 2012](#)
- [July 2012](#)
- [June 2012](#)
- [May 2012](#)
- [April 2012](#)
- [March 2012](#)
- [February 2012](#)
- [January 2012](#)
- [December 2011](#)
- [November 2011](#)
- [October 2011](#)
- [September 2011](#)
- [August 2011](#)
- [July 2011](#)
- [June 2011](#)
- [May 2011](#)
- [August 2005](#)
- [January 2004](#)
- [October 2003](#)
- [August 2003](#)
- [July 2003](#)
- [May 2003](#)
- [April 2003](#)
- [March 2003](#)
- [February 2003](#)

OLDER STORIES BY CATEGORY

- [Advanced Technologies \(167\)](#)
- [American Empire \(718\)](#)
- [Analysis \(367\)](#)

- Ancient World (6)
- Arts (242)
 - Architecture (1)
 - Books (133)
 - Film (66)
 - Humor (25)
 - Music (11)
 - Satire (6)
 - Theater (4)
- Assange extradition (300)
- Bahrain (7)
- Ban Ki-Moon (3)
- Biden Administration (654)
- Campaign 2016 (1,073)
- Campaign 2020 (171)
- Censorship (225)
- Climate Change (221)
- CN Live! (200)
- CN Radio (6)
- CN Video (22)
- Cold War (101)
- Column (378)
- Commentary (2,592)
- Consortium News at 25 (45)
- Consortium News on Flash Points (9)
- Consortium News Radio (12)
- Consortiumnews.com (531)
- Constitution (938)
- COVID-19 (363)
- Dag Hammarskjöld (4)
- Disinformation (18)
- Economy (254)
- Editorial (1)
- Election 2016 (11)
- Election 2020 (84)
- Environment (425)
- Fall Fund Drive (11)
- Foreign Policy (2,836)
- Gary Webb Freedom of the Press Award (7)
- Gun Violence (52)
- Guns (15)
- Health Care (4)

- Health Reform (183)
- History (217)
- Human Rights (3,766)
 - Civil Rights (172)
- Immigration (69)
- Income Inequality (125)
- Indigenous People (76)
- Intelligence (2,089)
- International (3,235)
 - Afghanistan (239)
 - Africa (148)
 - Albania (2)
 - Algeria (7)
 - Argentina (22)
 - Asia (28)
 - Australia (154)
 - Bahrain (8)
 - Bangladesh (5)
 - Belarus (10)
 - Belgium (9)
 - Bolivia (28)
 - Brazil (69)
 - Britain (452)
 - Canada (21)
 - Central America (26)
 - Chile (21)
 - China (362)
 - Congo (12)
 - Cuba (67)
 - Czech Republic (2)
 - Denmark (6)
 - East Timor (3)
 - Ecuador (80)
 - Egypt (52)
 - Ethiopia (5)
 - Eurasia (8)
 - Europe (137)
 - European Union (52)
 - Finland (6)
 - France (105)
 - Gabon (2)
 - Georgia (5)

- Germany (124)
- Ghana (7)
- Great Britain (31)
- Greece (9)
- Guatemala (7)
- Gulf States (64)
- Haiti (5)
- Hungary (6)
- Iceland (8)
- India (81)
- Indonesia (13)
- International Criminal Court (ICC) (13)
- Iran (208)
- Iraq (234)
- Ireland (12)
- Israel (307)
- Italy (43)
- Japan (18)
- Kazakhstan (2)
- Kenya (13)
- Korea Peninsula (16)
- Kuwait (2)
- Laos (3)
- Latin America (105)
- Lebanon (45)
- Liberia (1)
- Libya (39)
- Mali (12)
- Mexico (32)
- Middle East (272)
- Moldova (1)
- Montenegro (1)
- Morocco (2)
- NATO (104)
- New Zealand (6)
- Nicaragua (3)
- Nigeria (8)
- North Korea (34)
- Northern Rhodesia (3)
- Norway (12)
- Pakistan (28)
- Palestine (244)

- Philippines (12)
- Poland (16)
- Portugal (3)
- Qatar (9)
- Romania (1)
- Russia (813)
- Rwanda (19)
- Saudi Arabia (126)
- Scotland (22)
- Slovenia (1)
- Somalia (12)
- South Africa (30)
- South Korea (19)
- Soviet Union (62)
- Spain (26)
- Sudan (7)
- Sweden (42)
- Syria (135)
- Taiwan (34)
- Thailand (6)
- Timor Leste (2)
- Tunisia (6)
- Turkey (49)
- Ukraine (566)
- United Arab Emirates (34)
- United Kingdom (309)
- United Nations (324)
- Venezuela (89)
- Vietnam (80)
- Yemen (65)
- Yugoslavia (7)
- Zambia (4)
- International News Analysis (118)
- Iran-Contra (15)
- Japan (22)
- Joe Lauria (6)
- Julian Assange (182)
- Labor (162)
- Legal (663)
- Letter from Britain (10)
- Letter From India (1)
- Letter from London (1)

- Lobbying (9)
- Lost History (1,744)
- Madeleine Albright (3)
- Media (2,942)
- Middle East (140)
- Mike Pompeo (13)
- Militarism (616)
- Military (126)
- Military Industry (72)
- Nazism (17)
- New Zealand (3)
- News Analysis (43)
- Nigeria (1)
- Nuclear Weapons (115)
- Obama Administration (4,378)
- October Surprise (123)
- Opinion (18)
- Pentagon (138)
- Poland (3)
- Police Brutality (66)
- Politics (3,145)
- Press Freedom (68)
- Prisons (12)
- Propaganda (397)
- Protest (37)
- Protests (133)
- Public Health (2)
- Race Relations (48)
- Racism (94)
- Religion (431)
- Right Wing (2,847)
- Robert Parry (19)
- Russiagate (248)
- Science (5)
- Secrecy (1,477)
- Social Media (48)
- Sport (4)
- Spring Fund Drive (25)
- Summer Fund Drive (5)
- Surveillance (35)
- Susan Williams (1)
- Terrorism (22)

- The Bush-43 Administration (1,729)
- Torture (64)
- Trump Administration (1,562)
- U.N. General Assembly (3)
- U.S. (1,841)
- U.S. Congress (187)
- U.S. Justice Dept. (37)
- U.S. Supreme Courrt (39)
- Uncategorized (111)
- Until This Day–Historical Perspectives on the News (550)
- VIPS (20)
- VIPS Memos (23)
- War Crimes (61)
- WikiLeaks (722)
- WikiLeaks Series (12)
- Winter Fund Drive (15)
- WMD (18)
- Women (55)

[Comment Policy](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Contact Us](#)

Copyright © 2023

. All Rights Reserved.

The Magazine Basic Theme by bavotasan.com.