

Just like that Sheila Fitzpatrick



STALIN, VOL. II: WAITING FOR HITLER, 1928-41
by Stephen Kotkin.
Allen Lane, 1154 pp., £35, October 2017, 978 0 7139 9945 7

STEPHEN KOTKIN's Stalin is all paradox. He is pockmarked and physically unimpressive, yet charismatic; a gambler, but cautious; undeterred by the prospect of mass bloodshed, but with no interest in personal participation. Cynical about everyone else's motives, he himself 'lived and breathed ideals'. Suspicious of 'fancy-pants intellectuals', he was an omnivorous reader whose success in getting the Russian creative intelligentsia into line was 'uncanny'. Inclined to paranoia, he was still able to keep it under control. Intensely suspicious of almost everyone, he was not suspicious enough about Hitler.

In the period covered by this volume of the biography, Stalin almost never travelled, deriving his information from reading and listening to reports. Accordingly, the story 'takes place largely in [Stalin's] office, and, indeed, in his mind'. The problem, however, is how to get into the mind of a tricky man whose public utterances were often deliberately misleading and whose personal archive is so beautifully crafted as to be a work of art. Kotkin's method is to give us a kind of collage of the events and information on disparate issues that must have come Stalin's way on a typical day. For example: a foreign policy crisis, intelligence reports, news of his son's bad behaviour in school, Politburo rivalries, a ceremonial parade of aviation heroes, the opening of a party congress, letters from his wife, industrial output targets, agricultural problems, the latest literary scandal, meeting a delegation of communists from Ulan Bator. It's a bit like the old Soviet genre of day by day 'Chronicles of Life and Work' of famous men, enlivened with Kotkin's comments and analysis.

Much of this information comes from Soviet daily newspapers, which Stalin undoubtedly read; the problem is that, without direct access to what went on in his mind, it's often impossible to know what specifically made an impression on him and what that impression was. Although ostensibly looking through Stalin's eyes at the world, Kotkin doesn't limit his collage to issues known to have interested Stalin, but rather picks out what he himself thinks is important, colourful or appropriate for his purposes. Thus, the Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression get their slice of

narrative, though ‘how much Stalin understood or paid attention [to these events] remains uncertain’; and Kotkin’s collage includes regular bulletins from Mongolia that probably reflect an authorial agenda (balancing the familiar view to the west with the view to the east) rather than any particular interest on Stalin’s part.

This is the ‘everything’ bagel of Stalin biography, encompassing internal politics, international affairs (east as well as west), intelligence, diplomatic and military history, culture, economics, personal and social life. Its three major sections, of more or less equal length, focus on collectivisation in the early 1930s, the Great Purges of 1937-38, and the international crisis beginning with the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939 and ending with the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. From that list, most historical accounts privilege the Great Purges, but in his preface Kotkin tells us he thinks collectivisation is the most important. That section doesn’t come across as the heart of his narrative, however. It’s the last section, on the international scene and the lead-up to war, that plays that role; and its importance to the overall story is flagged by his subtitle ‘Waiting for Hitler’.

Stalin’s decisive victory over his political opponents came in the late 1920s. Almost immediately, to the surprise of many, he embarked on an ambitious programme of revolutionary economic transformation that included nationalisation of industry and urban trade, the establishment of central economic planning to further rapid economic development, and collectivisation of peasant agriculture. Kotkin is not much interested in Stalin-the-moderniser. The collectivisation drive interests him because of its risks, its ideological underpinning and its ruthlessness – peasants were systematically intimidated by having a portion of their number expropriated and deported into the hinterland as ‘class enemies’ or ‘kulaks’. Kotkin sees collectivisation as a gamble that could well have ended in disaster and was twice saved by pure luck: the extra month of spring weather in 1930 that compensated for the late sowing that resulted from peasant resistance, and the good harvest of 1933. Before that harvest, however, intense state pressure on peasants to deliver grain had led to famine in all the major grain-growing regions of the country. Kotkin accepts that the famine was Stalin’s responsibility, in that he had refused to lower procurement pressure even when reports came in that peasants were starving, but concludes that the famine, though it derived more from Stalin’s policies and ruthlessness in implementing them, ‘was not intentional’. This is an unambiguous rejection of the view widely held by Ukrainians and reflected *inter alia* in Anne Applebaum’s recent account of famine in the Ukraine. In Kotkin’s view, Stalin’s actions ‘do not indicate that he was trying to exterminate peasants or ethnic Ukrainians ... There was no “Ukrainian” famine; the famine was Soviet.’ Kazakhs in fact suffered proportionally much more than Ukrainians, with up to 1.4 million deaths out of a total population of 6.5 million, compared to Ukraine’s 3.5 million deaths out of 33 million. But Stalin wasn’t specifically trying to target Kazakhs either, even though in this region collectivisation was accompanied by a lethal policy of forced settlement of nomads. He was trying to get as much grain and other foodstuffs as he could out of peasants who didn’t want to give it up.

What makes collectivisation central to Kotkin’s story is that its near failure and huge social costs caused many communists retrospectively to doubt its wisdom – or so Kotkin

assumes Stalin assumed, probably rightly in both cases – even though such criticisms, given the political climate of the 1930s, remained unexpressed. Kotkin's conclusion, plausible though not provable, is that 'Stalin became haunted not by the peasants' horrors under collectivisation but by the party criticism of him regarding those horrors, which would become the dark spur of his mass murders in the wanton terror ... driven by him.'

Kotkin has no doubt about Stalin's direct personal responsibility for initiating and directing the Great Purges. This episode of state terror started with the show trial in summer 1936 of a stellar cast of Old Bolsheviks, mainly former Oppositionists accused of wrecking and espionage, some of whom had until very recently held high government positions. By the winter of 1936-37, all senior industrial administrators were at risk of being revealed as 'enemies of the people', and by the early spring, so were provincial party secretaries. Denunciations were solicited, as the NKVD worked overtime making night-time arrests, interrogating the victims and forcing them to confess to bizarre conspiracies against the state and to incriminate others, dispatching them to prison, the Gulag or execution. Top military leaders were condemned in closed trials in the summer of 1937. What had started as terror against the communist and professional elite spread to the broader population. Some ethnic minorities, particularly those like Poles and Germans who might be suspected of loyalty to an outside power, were targeted; and the socially marginal, like runaway kulaks, horse-thieves and religious sectarians, were rounded up according to regional quotas and, in many cases, shot. The bloodletting, headed by Nikolai Ezhov, the NKVD chief, continued through 1938 and was only effectively checked at the end of that year when Ezhov was removed and replaced by Lavrentiy Beria.

Nobody really has a good explanation for the Great Purges, including Kotkin. The most interesting aspect of his account is how firmly he disposes of arguments that Stalin initiated the terror because of some sense of overwhelming crisis or threat.

Domestically, he faced 'astonishingly little overt political opposition of any kind'. On the international scene, there was a possibility of war, but that had been around for a few years. 'There was no immediate threat – social, economic, political – to the country or to the regime's legitimacy or stability, no crisis. But then, suddenly, there was total crisis.' When Stalin initiated mass (as opposed to elite) terror in the summer of 1937, 'there was no "dynamic" forcing him to do so, no "factional" fighting, no heightened threat abroad. The terror was not spiralling out of his control. He just decided, himself, to approve quota-driven eradication of entire categories of people in a planned indiscriminate terror known as mass operations.'

Why did he do it? That's the question for which Kotkin has no real answer. He concedes that Stalin may well have wanted to get rid of 'evasive, self-serving' bureaucrats and replace tired, ill-educated Old Bolsheviks with young promotees with better education, but, as Kotkin rightly points out, 'Stalin faced no imperative to murder them. He could sack or transfer any local satrap at will.' He does offer a kind of explanation of his own: namely, that he wanted to 'break the will' of his own closest Politburo associates, men like Molotov, Mikoyan and Voroshilov who had been totally loyal up to now but might conceivably one day cease to be, and that this constituted 'a key motivation for the

fantastic terror of 1936-38'. But this seems an even less plausible motive for mass murder, particularly as most of these Politburo associates neither fell victim to the purges nor emerged (at least in the case of Molotov and Mikoyan) visibly broken. In the end, Kotkin may be on safer ground echoing the words of Adam Ulam, who wrote in 1982 that 'there is in Stalin's terror an element of sheer preposterousness which defies explanation.'

Oddly, given that Kotkin's account of the Great Purges features Stalin so prominently as author and producer, he gives Stalin little credit for an equally striking achievement, notably closing them down at the end of 1938 without losing power or even reputation in the party. Here Kotkin follows the standard line in assuming that ending the purges was a simple matter, devoid of political risk. This is implausible: the operation seems simple only because in practice it worked so well (Ezhov went quietly; his replacement, Beria, managed an effective clean-up operation). Kotkin is astonished by Stalin's sudden change of course ('just like that'), but his brief discussion focuses only, though rather perfunctorily, on motive – 'Had [Stalin] become less paranoid?' Or was it perhaps that, with Hitler's occupation of the Sudetenland, the international crisis now looked serious enough to demand Stalin's full attention? 'We cannot definitively establish his motivations,' Kotkin concludes.

Foreign policy, including the full gamut of diplomatic, military and intelligence history, is central in this book. But Stalin – more or less ideology-free in this arena, in contrast to the domestic one – is not the player setting the agenda. It was Hitler who was 'driving world politics', while Stalin, like the rest of Europe, tried to work out how to react. Nor was it a question of a love affair between dictators – Kotkin is very clear about the suspicious antagonism between the two – but of Stalin trying to find a way of avoiding the war that Hitler was evidently planning, if possible by deflecting it onto the Western powers, while Britain and France, for their part, tried to deflect it onto the Soviet Union. Often a gambler, Stalin sometimes lost his nerve; in the lead-up to the Second World War, 'he shrank from trying to pre-empt Hitler militarily and failed to pre-empt him diplomatically.' In other words, Hitler beat him at the game, and – remarkably, in a biography of Stalin – Kotkin's story ends, not with Stalin, but with Hitler's miscalculation in taking Russia on.

In Kotkin's reading, Stalin is not 'the supreme realist – patient, shrewd and implacable' – described by Henry Kissinger, or even the 'rational and level-headed' statesman following traditional Russian imperatives portrayed by the Israeli historian Gabriel Gorodetsky. Kotkin's Stalin is shrewd and crafty, but sometimes too crafty for his own good. He makes mistakes and sometimes allows himself to be blinded by obsessions like his obsession with Trotsky, whom he hunts down and ultimately has murdered in 1940. Stalin's gambles, among which Kotkin counts the Non-Aggression Pact and the Finnish war, often end badly; and his obsessions sometimes bring about the very consequences he fears. Obsessed though he was with spying against the Soviet Union, Stalin's Great Purges had no ascertainable impact on foreign espionage activity (that, Kotkin judges, was not in any case their real point) but shattered or rendered useless his own remarkable spy network in Europe. Then, when he signed the pact with Germany thus allowing multiple German economic and trade delegations into Soviet territory in

the last years before the war, ‘direct German intelligence-gathering, which had been almost non-existent, became significant.’

Stalin’s biggest foreign policy mistake, in Kotkin’s reading, was to misjudge British intentions because of his obsession with British imperialism. Dismissing Churchill as a standard-issue imperialist, he overlooked his real hostility to Nazi Germany. Despite retaining until 1939 a foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, who favoured the League of Nations and a Western coalition against Hitler, Stalin ‘refused to distinguish between the imperialists, as either “pacific” (democratic) or “aggressor” (fascist). He divided the world into just two camps, and for him, as for Lenin, all diplomacy amounted to two-faced intercourse with enemies.’ Without offering much concrete evidence for his claim, Kotkin characterises him as a Germanophile on the model of the tsarist conservative Pyotr Durnovó.

Stalin misjudged Hitler too, assuming that he would never risk a two-front war, and also that he could be persuaded out of any invasion plans by the economic advantages of the 1939 pact. The pact, as Stalin (as channelled by Kotkin) saw it, was a ‘miraculous’ achievement that ‘deflected the German war machine, delivered a bounty of German machine tools, enabled the reconquest and Sovietisation of tsarist borderlands, and reinserted the USSR into the role of arbitrating world affairs’. Stalin felt no pangs of conscience about abandoning the Comintern’s anti-fascist ‘popular front’ policy (not that Kotkin, no admirer of the international left, faults him on this). But, assuming Hitler was a Realpolitiker in foreign policy like himself, Stalin was ‘bafflingly slow to come to grips with the centrality of ideology in the Nazi programme’. On this and other matters, he received much information that might have led him to the right conclusion, but ‘labelled as “disinformation” whatever he chose not to believe’. This was notoriously the case in his failure to pay attention to multiple intelligence reports of a pending German attack in the late spring of 1941, which he attributed to British and German disinformation. ‘For Stalin, the question was not whether war with the Nazi regime was inescapable, but whether it was inescapable this year.’ Late spring and summer was the season for attack, and right up to the end, on 20 June 1941, Stalin clung to the hope that, for this season, it could be avoided.

Kotkin himself is very much a Realpolitiker in his treatment of foreign policy. In fact, he seems to see himself as a *better* Realpolitiker than Stalin, rarely reading moral lessons but sometimes mentally putting himself in Stalin’s place in the Kremlin and correcting his mistakes. This may annoy those who would like expressions of outrage at the Non-Aggression Pact, but it produces a fresh reading of the Finnish war, which Kotkin sees as ‘avoidable’ by the Finns, who were ‘morally in the right’, but ‘geopolitically in the wrong’, and who should have taken Stalin’s willingness to negotiate and compromise more seriously. This is one of the cases cited by Kotkin in support of his contention that Stalin, unlike Hitler, was ‘a revolutionary imperialist with limits’, who did not, in fact, want to take over the whole country. In the Winter War with Finland in 1939-40, the Soviets’ egregious initial military failure showed up not only Defence Minister Voroshilov’s incompetence but also Stalin’s out-of-date sense of military matters. However, these ‘shocking Red Army failures of December 1939’ should not obscure the

fact that Stalin took the lesson to heart, and that after Timoshenko took over military leadership, ‘the Soviets had won the war decisively and exceeded their objectives.’

IN Volume I of his biography, Kotkin portrayed Stalin as a talented man, by far the best of the bunch of Soviet leaders and would-be leaders of the 1920s (including Lenin), not ‘a sociopath in the eyes of those who worked most closely with him’ or, for that matter, in Kotkin’s authorial eye. That was always going to be a problem in Volume II, so I waited with considerable interest to see how he solved it. The solution is uncharacteristically anodyne. Not a sociopath up to 1927, Stalin ‘by 1929-30 ... was exhibiting an intense dark side. As the decade progresses, he will go from learning to be a dictator to becoming impatient with dictatorship and forging a despotism in mass bloodshed.’ So we are back on familiar territory for Stalin biographies – but why did this transformation happen? Nothing in Stalin’s background explains it, according to Kotkin, and while there was ‘dark’ potential in Stalin’s personality and that of the revolutionary party he came to lead, that is not the explanation either. Rather, the key to understanding lies in Lord Acton’s well-known saying that ‘power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ So if Stalin had lost the power struggle of the 1920s, might he have been a better man? No doubt, and Trotsky would have been a worse one, not just because of the corrupting effects of power but also because he, too, was part of a ‘single party system that, on the basis of class analysis, denied legitimacy to political opposition’ as well as a Marxist who didn’t understand that ‘there could be no freedom without markets and private property.’ But this anti-Marxist trope is secondary, almost an afterthought. The big thing is that absolute power, for which dictators cannot help striving, not only corrupts but also ‘shapes absolutely’.

This second volume of biography begins with two epigraphs. One, predictably is from Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, putting Stalin in his place with the aphorism that killing one’s fellow citizens, betraying one’s friends and acting without pity or faith are methods by which a ruler ‘may indeed gain power, but not glory’. The second epigraph is less conventional, at least in this context: ‘Midway on life’s journey I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight path was lost.’ Assuming that this is in fact a comment on Stalin rather than a report on a midlife crisis of the author’s, it not only suggests a biographer’s degree of sympathy with his subject that is not always evident in the text, but also invokes a dimension of personal tragedy. But if that is how Kotkin meant to portray Stalin, it hasn’t come off. Politically, the volume ends with an enormous setback for him (the German attack of June 1941), but this, as we know, didn’t in fact lead to Stalin’s and his country’s destruction. As far as personal life is concerned, the suicide of Stalin’s wife, Nadya, at the end of 1932 is treated fairly cursorily as an event that upset Stalin at the time but didn’t fundamentally change him; and, as Kotkin occasionally reminds the reader, her death was more or less the end of his private life (quoting an affectionate letter from Molotov to his wife in 1940, Kotkin notes that ‘Stalin hadn’t written a letter like that in a decade’). Perhaps loneliness is to be developed as a theme in Volume III, and the Dante epigraph is setting us up for a dénouement in which Stalin becomes King Lear.

Stalin biographers, of whom there are now many, come with all sorts of personal agendas and emotional predispositions. Henri Barbusse admired his subject, Trotsky

and Isaac Deutscher wanted to cut him down to size. Dmitri Volkogonov wrote in late Soviet disillusionment, and the German historian Jörg Baberowski in contemptuous disgust. When I was writing my study of Stalin and his closest associates, *On Stalin's Team*, I toyed with the conceit that, by taking my point of observation as an invisible presence in Stalin's Politburo, I could insert myself into his inner circle as a spy – just what he always feared would happen. Kotkin doesn't see himself as a spy vis-à-vis Stalin, and he wouldn't be happy with invisibility. Rather, it seems as if he might be casting himself as a kind of alter ego, looking over Stalin's shoulder as he sat at his desk, doing the maths along with Stalin on foreign and domestic policy, and letting us know when Stalin gets it wrong. It would surely have infuriated Stalin to have Kotkin around as a doppelgänger, a fancy-pants Western intellectual patronisingly second-guessing his actions, whose noncorporeal presence meant he couldn't be taken out and shot. But at least Stalin might take some satisfaction from the fact that, as far as his personal core was concerned, he was too clever for Kotkin. In the end, the inner man, whoever he was, remains unrevealed.