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Stalin's Library – a Q&A with author Geoffrey Roberts

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Geoffrey Roberts, author of *Stalin's Library: A Dictator and his Books* answers questions about what he learned from writing the book

Why did you write *Stalin's Library*?

The availability of a fantastic source – the remnants of Stalin's personal library –– was an opportunity not to be missed. The collection includes many hundreds of texts he marked or annotated. No other source is more revealing of Stalin's most intimate personal thoughts, feelings and beliefs.

Having previously published a book about Stalin as a warlord, I wanted to author a more wide-ranging book about Stalin's life and career. But I didn't want to write a conventional biography. There were already many good biographies of Stalin yet none of them portrayed the detail of his life as a working intellectual. Erik van Ree's *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin* (2002) and Sarah Davies & James Harris's *Stalin's World* (2014) do focus on Stalin as an intellectual and make good use of the library material, but not in the sustained and systematic way as I have done.

Stalin was, indeed, an intellectual. He was a man of action and power but he also loved reading, he loved learning about ideas. He spent most of his life reading, writing and

reading, he loved learning about ideas. He spent most of his life reading, writing and editing. As an ideologue and a committed communist, the foundation of his political beliefs and commitments was his intellectual engagement with ideas.

So it was the source that attracted you to this project?

Yes, that and the fact that in the 2010s the library materials became more accessible, not alone in Russian archives but also on-line in digital form. There was a Yale University Press project to digitise all the books, pamphlets and journals Stalin had marked – digitising not only the markings (*pometki* in Russian) but the texts as a whole. In fact, only about a third of the material was digitised so I had to make numerous trips to Moscow to study the original books.

Most of what we know about Stalin's private thinking comes from public or semi-public actions and utterances, including reports of his interactions with close comrades. There was an element of performance about the way Stalin read, marked and wrote in his library's books, since he must have known, or at least suspected, his *pometki* would become an object of scholarly study. Mostly, however, the traces of his reading give the impression of being spontaneous, and expressive of an intellectual immersing himself in a world of ideas.

Stalin believed in the power of words to shape people's consciousness and their actions so he cared about the deployment of ideas more than anything else. Indeed, books had liberated him from his lowly Georgian Orthodox Christian background and transformed him into a revolutionary who was intent not just on changing the world, but human nature itself.

Did it take you long to produce the book?

About a decade – which is not as long as it sounds! I had other projects, too, and the logistics of the archive work were both complex and time-consuming, as were the challenges of deciphering Stalin's handwriting.

Also, to write the book I had to research not only the surviving library books but many hundreds of other archived documents in Stalin's personal file series, which contains several thousand files (most of which have been digitised by Yale UP and its Russian partners). Moreover, while there are a lot of source notes in *Stalin's Library*, they are

only the tip of my iceberg of archival research in Russia that began in the mid-1990s.

Another reason for the book's lengthy gestation was that it took me a long time to think through how to write the book so as to make best use of the evidence from Stalin's personal library and to present it in interesting and accessible way. Then I had a number of conceptual breakthroughs.

First, I came across Al Alvarez's definition of an intellectual as someone to whom ideas are emotionally important. That led me to look at Stalin's *pometki* differently. I could see what an emotionally engaged intellectual he was – something that shouts at you from the pages of his marked books.

Second, I came to think the book should be about Stalin's work as a writer and editor, as well as a reader. A significant inspiration in that regard was the work of Ethan Pollock and David Brandenberger.[i] The history of Stalin's book collection and its fate after he died also piqued my interest. The first substantive chapter I wrote was about his library's history. Once I'd done that, I knew the rest of the book was possible.

Third, I realised that while the words Stalin wrote in his books were very interesting, so too were his non-verbal markings: most of Stalin's *pometki* consists of what H.L. Jackson called 'signs of attention'[ii] – underlinings, sidelines and brackets. The same, by the way, is true of most people who read and mark books, myself included.

Finally, I came to understand that to properly contextualise the library material I must write what was, in effect, a short biography of Stalin focused on his relationship with books.

Stalin's Library is my most wide-ranging and complex book but once I started writing it took me only a year or so to produce a draft. After many years of excuses and delays I had finally promised my editor at Yale – Heather McCallum – that I would deliver the manuscript in time for publication on the 70th anniversary of Stalin's death in March 2023. In the event, I submitted a year early. She was as amazed as I was!

So, Stalin's handwriting is hard to read?

Yes, sometimes very hard. A further challenge is that not all the markings in his library's books are Stalin's. Some of the texts are second-hand or borrowed from other libraries

and have been written upon by previous readers. Family members such as his son Vasily or daughter Svetlana, also marked books that are part of Stalin's collection. It took me a while to "to get my eye in" and be able to identify with a degree of confidence, if not always certainty, which verbal and non-verbal marks were made by Stalin.

What was the hardest chapter to write?

The trickiest was the chapter on Stalin and Soviet literature. Generally speaking, Stalin did not mark fiction nor were his literature books stamped as belonging to him – perhaps because they were considered a family collection rather than his personal possession. Consequently, Stalin's fiction collection – reportedly several thousand volumes – disappeared without trace after his death, seemingly dispersed anonymously to other libraries. Hence our knowledge of the contents of the fiction section of Stalin's library is limited to the books he mentioned or those that others claimed he read or possessed.

In that chapter I focused on Stalin's views on fiction rather than his relations with particular writers, about which there was already a considerable body of literature. The problem with the latter corpus of work is that when you drill down to its sources there is little hard documentary evidence of Stalin's relationship with this or that writer, as opposed to *post-hoc* memoir sources by those writers, their family and friends.

There is certainly no doubting the huge impact Stalinist repression had on Soviet writers. According to Carol Any's estimate, of the 2400 members of the Soviet Writers' Union in the mid-1930s, 600 were arrested.[iii]

Wasn't Stalin also a poet?

He was, briefly, in his pre-Bolshevik youth, but none of his poems were republished in Soviet times, nor was there any question of including them in his collected works. Yemel'yan Yaroslavsky did mention and cite one of the poems in his 1939 short biography of Stalin.[iv] But there was no such mention in his official biography that was published around the same time and revised after the Second World War.

When did Stalin start collecting books?

Stalin read a lot from an early age. He was a studious boy who, later, as an underground revolutionary in Tsarist Russia spent a lot of time in prison and in exile, where there was

little else to do but read. Only after the revolution and civil war did Stalin begin to accumulate a personal book collection. In the mid-1920s he employed a librarian – Shushanika Manuchar'yants – who helped transform Stalin's book collection into an identifiable personal library.

By the time Lenin died in 1924 there were about 9,000 volumes in his personal library.[v] Stalin's library contained, I estimate, some 25,000 texts when he died in 1953. The plan was to turn his main Moscow dacha – where most of the books were kept – into a Stalin Museum. But Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation scuppered that idea and, instead, Stalin's books were dispersed along with the rest of his personal effects. However, party archivists retained five and a half thousand books that identifiably belonged to Stalin or contained his *pometki*.

You mentioned Shushanika Manuchar'yants. Was she your discovery?

Shusha – as her friends called her – was quite well known in the Soviet Union as Lenin's personal librarian because of a memoir she wrote about the experience of working for him. She mentioned Stalin only in passing, as she did his young wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, who was a comrade and co-worker in Lenin's office. But the Hungarian historian, Miklós Kun, identified a document that pointed to Shusha's role as Stalin's librarian after Lenin's death, which led me to delve deeper.[vi] Without Shusha we would have known far less about the scope of Stalin's book collection and reading interests. She was the one who prompted Stalin to devise a classification scheme for the shelving of his books and the use of an *ex libris* stamp to identify them. It is because of Shusha's system of stamping that several thousands of Stalin's books survived the Khruschevite purging of his library.

Stalin's use of Shushanika Manuchar'yants as a professional librarian showed how seriously the dictator valued books as he strived from the 1920s onwards to create a personal library that would contain a vast and diverse store of human knowledge, not only the humanities and social science but aesthetics, fiction and the natural sciences.

If you could own one of Stalin's books, which would it be?

There was a Russian translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* that only the Soviet elite were allowed to read. Stalin would have been sent a copy and may well have read or looked at it (he certainly paid a lot of attention to news from Nazi Germany). It would be

interesting to see if Stalin marked *Mein Kampf*, though no such copy is known to exist. But the book I'd really like to own would be Stalin's copy of *The Bible* when he was a seminary student. It would be fascinating to see how he marked that book!

In the book you write about wearing Stalin's spectacles to see the world through his eyes. In empathising with Stalin, is there a danger of glossing over his dictatorship and whitewashing the mass repressions of his regime?

Such a danger does exist, but *Stalin's Library* is from beginning to end filled with data and references to the authoritarianism and brutality of his rule. Indeed, fundamental to the book's findings is an explanation of why and how Stalin – someone who ideologically was an idealist – presided over such a maelstrom of political violence.

Part of my explanation is that Stalin's reading, and the personal library spaces he created for himself, distanced and insulated him from the practical realities of his ruthless exercise of power. But more important was the type of intellectual he was – a feeling intellectual for whom ideas had an emotional as well as a rational resonance.

After the book was first published my friend and colleague, James Ryan, suggested to me that perhaps the very young Stalin's pious Christian religious sensibilities were the root of the kind of political intellectual he later became. I think that's right: Stalin's Christian convictions were, by all accounts, deeply emotional, and the same was true of his Marxism and Communism.

His intellectual commitments were underpinned by the emotional force of his belief system, enabling him to sustain decades of brutal, dictatorial rule that resulted in the deaths of millions of innocent people.

Which of Stalin's *pometki* left the most significant impression on you?

I was intrigued by the care and attention that Stalin paid to some of Trotsky's writings, and to those of other political opponents such as Karl Kautsky. Stalin read to learn – even from his enemies. He also had a wicked sense of humour: "ha ha" or "hee hee" was a very common annotation of statements he found ridiculous or amusing, but by far his most frequent marginal comment was NB.

Apart from Marxist theory, Stalin read many history books and also a lot of fictional literature – plays, films scripts, poetry and short stories as well as novels. While he believed that Marxist ideology was the key to understanding everything about the social and human world, his favourite historian was a non-Marxist – Yuri (Robert) Vipper, who wrote mainly about ancient Greece and Rome and early Christianity.

People have wondered how influenced Stalin was by Machiavelli's machinating ideas, but to me it seems he was more interested in Germany's 'Iron Chancellor', Otto von Bismarck. Marx, Engels and Lenin were also greatly interested in Bismarck, particularly his 'revolution from above' that unified 19th century Germany. As Arfon Rees pointed out, more than one Stalin biographer has compared that Bismarckian revolution to Stalin's state-driven modernization of Soviet Russia through accelerated industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture.[vii] But I suspect Stalin was more interested in Bismarck's realpolitik diplomacy and foreign policy.

Perhaps Stalin's most surprising interest were books about the constitutional law of capitalist countries – as sources for his thinking about changing the Soviet constitution. He believed the Soviet political and legal system was superior to that of the West but was concerned to study alternative systems.

Is there any evidence that Stalin changed his mind about anything really important?

As I say in the book, Stalin was a fanatic with no secret doubt. In all the thousands of pages of books that he marked there is not even so much as a whisper of a hint of doubt about his Marxist ideology and communist beliefs. That does not mean Stalin's ideas did not change during the course of his lifetime. Stalin adapted his belief system to

practical realities, whether that was in relation to strategies for revolution, problems of building the world's first socialist society, requirements of military strategy or changing international politics – all important shifts in thinking informed by his book-reading.

Stalin was blinkered by his dogma but not blinded by it. He could see out and beyond the Marxist canon when he needed to. But that never led to any fundamental reappraisal of his basic beliefs

While Stalin was a serious intellectual, and a highly effective populariser of communist

ideology, he was far from being a great theoretician. Most of his ideas derived from Lenin; his only significant and original contribution to Marxist theory are his writings and statements on nationalism. As a Georgian and a man of Tsarist Russia's multi-ethnic borderlands Stalin had a much better grasp of the nationalist phenomena than other Bolshevik leaders, including Lenin. Indeed, what Stalin had to say about the national question remains interesting and relevant.

What did you learn about Stalin as a person?

That was he was a deeply flawed human being, but not a madman or a psychopath. Nor was he a megalomaniac. Politics for Stalin was about the exercise of power to achieve ideals. He was highly suspicious but not paranoid. All his wicked actions were motivated by his ideas and politics, not revenge or bloodlust.

Stalin was a political personality constructed from the outside-in. It was Stalin's politics, ideology and political life-story that formed his personality and character. There was a depth to Stalin as a person but it wasn't a psychological depth, it was political and ideological. Stalin was a complex character but that complexity was on the surface.

Stalin was ruthless, hard-hearted and unforgiving of betrayal. What made him like that was his life story, his personal experience and the situations he had to confront – and how he interpreted those through the prism of his particular politics and ideology.

He loved his family but neglected them for politics. He didn't get on with his children: his sons because they weren't intellectuals and Bolsheviks like he was; his daughter Svetlana because she was too rebellious and he didn't like her choice of men.

Stalin could be coarse, rude, ill-tempered and insensitive. He could be stubborn and inflexible and didn't like to admit mistakes. He was dogmatic and intolerant of ideas and views he didn't approve of. He didn't suffer fools gladly and was unforgiving when people let him down.

On the other hand, he could be charming, caring, affectionate, sensitive to the needs of others and, on occasion, protective of people from purges and terror. He had a sharp sense of humour. He was a workaholic who didn't have any real friends but liked to party with close comrades.

He was certainly egotistical and had an inflated opinion of himself as an intellectual, politician, statesman and military leader, but he resisted the extremes of his personality cult and often sought to tone it down. He saw the political utility of the cult – as a means to strengthen his own power and the security of the communist system – but worried that it went too far and undermined the authority of the party as an institution.

As an intellectual Stalin's commitment to self-education was a life-long cause. "I'm seventy years old", he told his errant son Vasily, pointing to the books he was reading on history, literature and military affairs. "Yet I go on learning just the same."

Is there anything you would like to add?

Yes, this emblematic statement by Stalin, who was at the Bolshoi Theatre when one of his generals arrived with bad news about the progress of the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939-1940:

> "You're lapsing into panic. I shall send you Chelpanov's book on the foundations of psychology. The pagan Greek priests were intelligent people. When they would get disturbing reports, they would adjourn to their bathhouses, take baths, wash themselves clean, and only afterward would they assess events and make decisions. The human being takes in through its organs various impressions and sensations and all kinds of shit. You have to throw out all the garbage and make decisions on the basis of the fundamental facts, and not under the influence of momentary moods or terrifying, non-existent things!"[viii]

Geoffrey Roberts is emeritus professor of history at University College Cork and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. A leading Soviet history expert, his many books include an award-winning biography of Zhukov, Stalin's general, and the acclaimed *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War*.

Notes

[i] In 2024 Brandenberger added to his oeuvre about Stalin as an editor when Stanford University Press published his *Stalin's Usable Past: A Critical Edition of the 1937 "Short History of the USSR"*.

[ii] H.L. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*, Yale University Press: London & New Haven 2001 p.28

[iii] C. Any, *The Soviet Writers' Union and its Leaders: Identity and Authority under Stalin*, Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois 2020 p.149.

[iv] An English edition of Yaroslavsky's book was published by the Foreign Languages Publishing House in 1940 and by Lawrence & Wishart in 1942: *Landmarks in the Life of Stalin*.

[v] *Biblioteka V.I. Lenina v Kremle: Katalog*, Moscow 1961.

[vi] G. Roberts, "Stalin and His Books: The Librarian's Tale" https://yalebooksblog.co.uk/2022/04/07/stalin-and-his-books-the-librarians-tale/

[vii] E.A. Rees, *Political Thought from Machiavelli to Stalin: Revolutionary Machiavellism*, Palgrave: London 2004.

[viii] I. Banac (ed), *The Diary of Georgy Dimitrov, 1933-1949*, Yale University Press: London & New Haven 2003, entry for 21 January 1940 pp.124-125. G. I. Chelpanov (1862-1936) was a Tsarist and Soviet era psychologist and philosopher.

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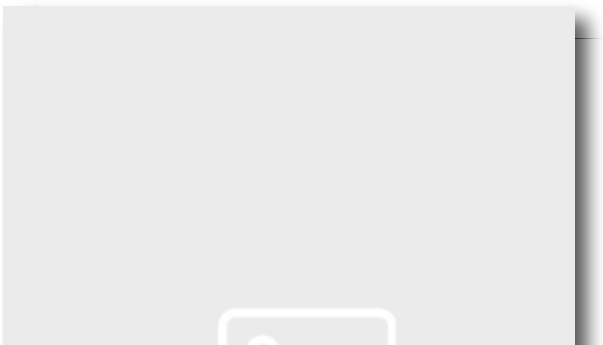

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