

Geoffrey Roberts

Interview with Manuel Ferez about Stalin and Soviet History

29 August 2026

<https://manuelferrez.com/que-leia-stalin-la-biblioteca-detras-del-dictador-entrevista-a-geoffrey-roberts/>

Your work on Stalin has challenged the conventional image of him as little more than an irrational and omnipotent tyrant. Across books such as *Stalin's Wars*, what originally led you to reconsider this widely accepted interpretation, and what do you think remains most misunderstood about Stalin as a political and wartime leader?

The idea that Stalin was an 'irrational and omnipotent tyrant' gained traction after Khrushchev denounced Stalin's brutal dictatorship at the 20th party congress in 1956. Central to Khrushchev's critique was exposure of Stalin's supposedly poor record as a war leader. Before 1956, Stalin's reputation as a warlord had been riding high - not surprisingly, given he had led his country to victory in the greatest war in history.

As an anti-Stalinist I went along with the Khrushchev's criticisms of Stalin, including the questioning of his role during the Second World War. Then I began to examine the evidence first-hand. In the 1980s I researched the Nazi-Soviet pact and concluded that Stalin's rational and pragmatic conduct of foreign policy was not characteristic of the actions of a mad, bad dictator. In the early 1990s I published an article that argued Stalin's refusal to heed intelligence reports of an imminent German attack in June 1941 was far from irrational or unreasonable. His miscalculation was hugely costly but it was the result of understandable reasons. Many years later I published *Stalin's Wars* in which I used evidence from Russian archives to show that Stalin was a highly effective Supreme Commander – who saved not just the USSR from Hitler and the Nazis but Europe, too. Stalin was the dictator who saved the world for democracy, as I somewhat provocatively put it.

In *Stalin's General: The Life of Georgy Zhukov*, you explore the relationship between Stalin and one of the Soviet Union's most important military commanders. What did Zhukov's career reveal to you about how power actually functioned at the highest levels of the Soviet system during the war?

Zhukov was Stalin's Deputy Supreme Commander and centrally involved in all the great battles of the Soviet-German war – Moscow in 1941, Stalingrad in 1943, Kursk in 1943, Belorussia in 1944 and Berlin in 1945. No one worked closer with Stalin than Zhukov. His memoirs are a key source for understanding Stalin's warlordship. They showed that while Stalin was no general, he was, as Zhukov put it, a 'splendid' supreme commander. Stalin,

who had long been a student of military affairs, proved willing and able to learn from the professionalism of his generals. But it was Stalin who forged the top Soviet generals into a cohesive and effective high command. Among his generals, Stalin was first among equals but only he was indispensable to the functioning of the Soviet war machine. Stalin dominated the Soviet high command but did not cower his generals like Hitler did. It was Stalin's charisma (amplified by his personality cult) that inspired the loyalty and devotion of tough professionals like Zhukov.

Your book *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953* covers a period in which Stalin's decisions helped shape not only the Soviet Union but the entire post-war world. When you look back at that book today, which of Stalin's strategic decisions do you consider the most consequential—and perhaps the most misunderstood?

Broadly, my interpretation of the origins of the cold war was that it was the result of misperceptions, misapprehensions and miscalculations by both sides. Different perceptions and political choices Soviet and Western leaders could have saved the grand alliance from complete collapse. And I'm talking about choices within the realm of possibility at the time. For example, in 1946 Stalin rejected an American proposal for a 25-year treaty on the disarmament and demilitarisation of Germany. A positive response to that proposal could have facilitated a German peace treaty that kept the country united and Europe undivided by the cold war. I also think that Stalin was wrong to outright reject Soviet and communist-bloc participation in the Marshall Plan for the postwar reconstruction of Europe. Both decisions were motivated by Stalin's suspicions of the West. These suspicions were longstanding, and ideologically rooted, but were informed by Moscow's perception that the West was trying to deprive the Soviet Union of the fruits of its great victory over Nazism. To be fair to Stalin, by the late 1940s he had stepped away from the cold war confrontation and was seeking to re-establish peaceful relations with the West. By this time, however, the West saw the Soviet Union as a threat, not a collaborator.

In *Stalin's Library: A Dictator and His Books*, you reconstruct a remarkably different image of Stalin: a reader who annotated, underlined and actively engaged with a vast range of books. What first drew you to Stalin's library as a subject, and at what point did you realise that it could fundamentally change our understanding of him?

That Stalin was political intellectual had long been obvious, not least because that was his own self-image – that was what he meant when he claimed to be merely 'Lenin's pupil'. Lenin has a huge personal library and worked surrounded by books, just like Stalin. The opening up of the Russian archives from the 1990s onwards provided access to a mountain of documentary material that showed Stalin the intellectual at work. Among these sources were the remnants of his personal book collection – many thousands of texts, including

hundreds that he had marked and annotated. These markings are the most intimate of all the available sources because they show Stalin thinking and feeling aloud.

Stalin was no Lenin, but he was a serious intellectual, whose belief in Marxism and Communism was wholly authentic. The big thing that I learned from writing *Stalin's Library* was that Stalin was a feeling intellectual. It was the emotional depth of his beliefs and ideas that enable him to sustain the decades-long mass repressions of his dictatorial regime. Stalin's crushing of his perceived enemies was political rather than personal, but it was energised by emotional force.

Was there anything in his library that genuinely surprised you?

One thing that didn't surprise me was the character of Stalin's library. As a 1970s Marxist, I had similar interests and a similar collection of socialist books! Nor was there anything peculiar about the way Stalin marked his books. Stalin's markings were similar to my own, except his were more methodical, and often more animated. What did surprise me was the care with which Stalin read the texts of his political opponents and how much he learnt from them, the prime example being Leon Trotsky during the early post-revolutionary years. People speculate about how much Stalin may have been influenced by the writings of arch realist, Niccolo Machiavelli. Actually, the guiding text for Bolshevik authoritarianism and ruthlessness – *Terrorism and Communism* (1920) - was written by Trotsky – a booklet much admired by Stalin.

Stalin's reading was mostly Marxist and Socialist but he read books by a wide variety of writers. His favourite historian, Yuri Vipper, was not a Marxist. Stalin was blinkered by his dogmatic Marxism but not blinded by it. He was able to see beyond its confines – an ability that enabled him to adapt his ideology in face of practical realities.

You have also written extensively about Soviet diplomacy and the origins of the Cold War. How has your research changed your understanding of the relationship between ideology and traditional great-power interests in Soviet foreign policy? Was Stalin primarily an ideological revolutionary, a Russian statesman pursuing national interests, or was that distinction itself misleading?

In terms of the classic debate about realpolitik versus ideology in Soviet foreign policy, my research started out as quite realist but gradually became more focussed on ideology. Stalin and Soviet foreign policy were, it seems to me, driven by ideology but the ideology in question was practical and experiential as well as doctrinally based. The best way to capture the role of that ideology in diplomacy and foreign policy decision-making is through historical narrative – unfolding stories of human action in changing material conditions and contexts. The story of transformational changes in Soviet ideology, discourse and identity

has been a central theme of my research. When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917 they were guided by the doctrine of world revolution. When the revolution failed to materialise and they found themselves under siege they embraced the concept of peaceful coexistence, conceived as a temporary tactic of survival but in the 1920s transformed into a more long-term strategy. After the Second World War the idea of peaceful coexistence underwent many modifications, culminating in the 1970s détente in which collaboration and interchange with the West was seen as necessary to prevent nuclear war but also the means to consolidate the position of the socialist camp and to facilitate further shifts to the left in world politics. Instead, it opened the communist bloc to outside influences that became, under Gorbachev, an important part of the story of the USSR's downfall.

My latest research on Soviet foreign policy has focussed on the role of the transnational communist peace movement in the transformation of the USSR's state identity after the Second World War – from a self-identifying revolutionary state to a peace-loving one. The action and discourse of the peace movement helped to embed in the Soviet elite, and in Soviet society, the notion that it was the struggle for peace that defined the USSR as an international actor – a self-conception that was critical to ameliorating the conflicts of the cold war, especially those involving proxy wars and military confrontation.

Stalin was actually quite passive in relation to the early development of the postwar peace movement but he permitted its leaders to pursue a mass, pluralistic peace movement that after his death became increasingly assertive of its independence from Moscow.

Looking across your books as a whole—from Stalin and Zhukov to Soviet diplomacy, the Second World War and Stalin's library—what do you hope readers take away about the Soviet system? Is there a central misconception about the Soviet Union that you have spent your career trying to correct?

I was drawn to the study of Soviet history by my socialist politics. I wanted to know how and why Soviet socialism turned out the way it did and whether there were viable historical alternatives to Stalinist repression and authoritarian state socialism. Above all, I was interested in the possibilities of reforming the system, of making it more humane and democratic.

After 50 years of studying the USSR my personal political verdict on the Soviet project is much kinder than it once was.

For more than seven decades the USSR stood as radical, socialist alternative to western capitalism. It was the world's first socialist country, a system based on public ownership, state planning, social welfare and egalitarian values. It showed that such a system was not utopian but a practical possibility; indeed, at times the Soviet system threatened to

economically outperform even the most advanced capitalist countries. Ultimately, the Soviets lost the economic competition with Western capitalism but they did succeed in building a world-class industrial power, one that defeated Nazi Germany, fought the United States to a standstill during the cold war, and created the military, economic, scientific, technical and cultural foundations that underpin the strength of contemporary Russia.

Of course, the Soviet socialist system was highly flawed: it was bureaucratic, repressive and often corrupt. And one should never forget the millions of innocent people who fell victim to Stalin's fanaticism. But throughout its existence the USSR inspired a great deal of idealism and popular support, domestically and internationally. Tens of millions of people around the globe continue to look back on Soviet socialism with nostalgia. Even those like me - critics of the system's authoritarianism and lack of democracy - have to admit that it had as many virtues as vices.

The Soviet Union stood for multinationalism, internationalism, and anti-imperialism; its governments valorised peaceful coexistence between different peoples, systems and values. As a multinational state, the USSR has been described as an 'affirmative action empire' - which - in theory, and often in practice - sought to end Russian ethnic oppression and domination of minority nations and establish harmonious relations between the state's different nations and ethnic groups. But while the Soviets supported cultural nationalism they ruthlessly resisted demands for political independence and sought to propagate Soviet patriotism as an alternative to nationalist politics. These efforts notwithstanding, it was nationalism - especially and ironically the Russian variety - that conspired to collapse the USSR.

To paraphrase Russian President, Vladimir Putin, if you don't miss the Soviet Union just a little, you have no heart. But anyone who imagines it can be resurrected needs to have their head examined.