

Understanding Stalin Through One's Own Eyes

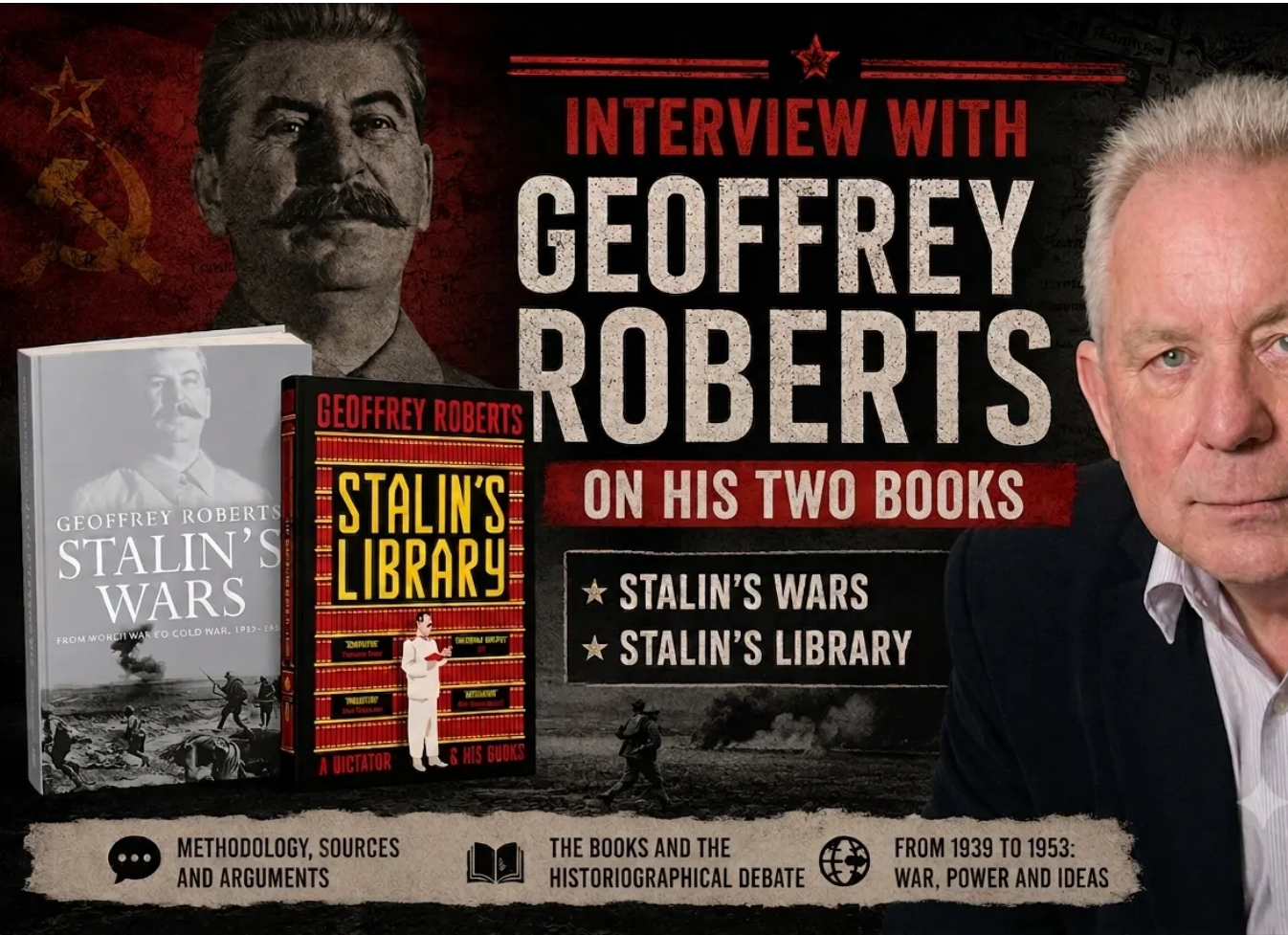
Historian Geoffrey Roberts discusses the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Operation Barbarossa, and seven decades of debate regarding Stalin's legacy in an exclusive interview for our podcast.



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Recently, the History Tv Show Show contacted Geoffrey Roberts—a leading historian specializing in Stalin and the Soviet Union’s role in World War II—for a brief interview to mark the publication of two of his works in Brazil for the first time.

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the world's foremost authorities on Stalin and Soviet foreign and military policy, has authored around 27 books, many of which have been translated into over a dozen languages.

Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953 (Yale University Press, 2017) drew on Russian archives that were newly opened at the time to reconstruct Stalin's military and diplomatic leadership throughout World War II and the early Cold War. Its central argument was that Stalin's military and strategic skills were decisive for Soviet victory, making him—unlike Roosevelt, Churchill, or even Hitler—indispensable to the war's outcome. The book sparked intense debate upon its release: while praised by some critics as an essential work for the study of Stalin, Soviet history, and the Cold War, it was also criticized for allegedly leaning too heavily toward defending Stalin's actions.

Stalin's Library: A Dictator and His Books (Yale University Press, 2022) took a different approach, using the surviving remnants of Stalin's personal library—tens of thousands of annotated volumes—to construct an intellectual biography of the dictator. The book was named Book of the Year by publications such as *The Australian*, *History Today*, and the Indian magazine *Open*; like his previous book, it sparked controversy regarding the degree of sympathy with which Roberts portrays his subject.

In this exclusive interview, Roberts discusses the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Stalin's miscalculations on the eve of Operation Barbarossa, the historiography of World War II, and the criticism he faced for his empathetic approach to one of history's most controversial figures.

On the two works

1. *Hermes Braga: Stalin's Wars* reconstructs Stalin's military and political leaders

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Geoffrey Roberts: Stalin's Wars (2006) is a study of Stalin as a warlord and peacer. It also deals with Soviet domestic politics and explores Stalin's personality. In it's a biography of Stalin during the last decade or so of his life. *Stalin's Library* is a wide-ranging intellectual biography of Stalin, in which I deal with his view on military affairs but there is not a great deal of overlap between the two books. *Stalin's Library* was much the harder book to write because of the difficulty of finding an effective way of presenting its core source material. It is much shorter than Stalin's words – so read that one first!

2. HB: In your assessment, what are the main strengths of each book — in terms of unpublished sources, historiographical argument, or approach — that set them apart from other biographies and studies of Stalin already published?

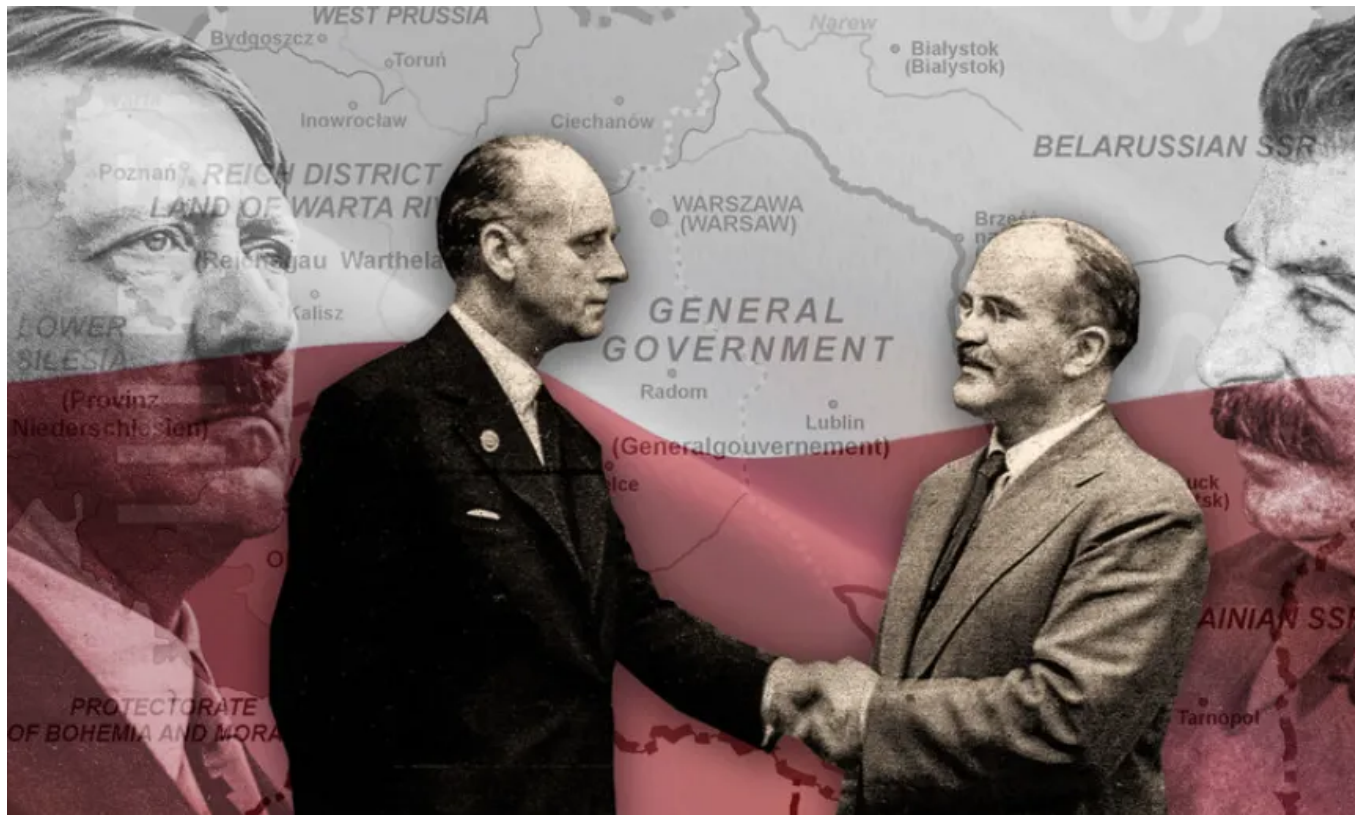
GR: *Stalin's Wars* was published 20 years ago yet it continues to be translated – recently into Portuguese, Spanish and Korean. It is gratifying that my extensive research in Soviet military, political and diplomatic archives remains unsurpassed. The book's narrative of Stalin's wartime role remains relevant. My thesis that Stalin was a great, albeit ruthless and brutal, war leader now commands, I would say, a consensus about historians. *Stalin's Library* is based mainly on the remnants of the dictator's personal book collection. I use this material to explore various aspects of Stalin's biography and to reveal what made him tick as a personality and politician. My major finding is that Stalin was a highly emotional political intellectual who invested a great deal of feeling into his ideas – including the belief that socialism and the Soviet system had to be defended at all costs.

On the Nazi-Soviet Pact and Stalin's foreign policy (1939–1941)

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Nazi Germany's Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and his Soviet counterpart, Vyacheslav Molotov, seal the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939).

3. HB: The German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty (September 1939), which followed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, is sometimes presented as proof of a genuine Nazi-Soviet alliance against Europe. Do you agree with that reading or do you see it differently?

GR: Initially, the Nazi-Soviet pact was a short-term, tactical manoeuvre: Stalin promised neutrality when Germany invaded Poland and Hitler agreed to limit eastward expansionism. Subsequently, the two dictators began to contemplate a longer-term relationship – more a compact than an alliance. That perspective changed until the fall of France in summer 1940 when Stalin responded to Hitler's huge military success by shoring up Soviet security, notably the Red Army's takeover of the Baltic States. Hitler saw Stalin's actions as threatening and resolved to liquidate the Soviet threat to Germany's domination of continental Europe. He also re-

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4. HB: Between 1939 and 1941, the USSR supplied raw materials to Germany and maintained secret trade agreements with the Nazi regime. To what extent was supply decisive in sustaining the German war machine during that period, and how had the German war machine sustained itself before that?

GR: After the signature of the Nazi-Soviet pact there was a revival of Germany's trade with the USSR – a return to the level of exports and imports prevalent in the 1920s and early 1930s, before Hitler seized power. Broadly, the Soviets provided raw materials and agricultural products and the Germans supplied manufactured goods, including military equipment. I would say the agreements were commercially confidential rather than secret, though the fact that the Soviets allowed the Germans to transit goods across their territory – and thereby circumvent the British naval blockade – was covered up.

It's hard to assess which side gained most from this trade but it was important for both countries and my guess is that the balance of advantages was more or less equal.

5. HB: Some argue that Stalin did everything possible to avoid war with Germany and was caught off guard by Operation Barbarossa in June 1941. Do you agree with that interpretation? How does the archival documentation available today support or challenge this thesis?

GR: There is no doubt whatsoever that Stalin sought to delay the Soviet-German war as long as possible, preferably until 1942, when Soviet mobilisation plans were scheduled to peak. Stalin's determination to avoid war led him to undervalue intelligence information that the Germans were going to attack. The Red Army wasn't completely surprised when Hitler launched Barbarossa but it certainly suffered from not being fully mobilised to defend Soviet frontiers. However, the most costly for the Red Army was the catastrophic failure of its various counter-offensives.

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The important point to note about Stalin's miscalculations was that he over-estimated the strength of Soviet defences. He believed they would absorb any German invasion long enough to allow the Red Army to complete its mobilisation and deployment. That mistaken belief made his gamble on keeping peace with Hitler for as long as possible seem far less risky than it actually was.

6. HB: Some critics use the term “national socialist” to characterize certain aspects of Stalinism — whether referring to the foreign policy of the 1939–41 period or elements of Soviet nationalism under Stalin. How do you assess this kind of comparison between Stalinism and Nazism?

GR: A better term is ‘National Bolshevism’ – which captures the combination of communism and patriotism that Stalin promoted in the prewar years as well as during the war itself. While Russian nationalism played a certain role in what was called Soviet patriotism, his regime was fundamentally multinational in character. ‘Stalinism’ unlike Nazism was internationalist.

On the historiography and memory of the Second World War

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EASTER EGG COLORING.

The Western view of the Soviet threat: in this 1952 caricature by Edwin Marcus titled "Easter Egg Coloring", Stalin "dirties" the planet with communist propaganda.

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Do you see any grounding for this hypothesis, or do you consider it a historiographical myth?

GR: Nazism was a species of nationalism. It had radical aspects and contained radical elements but it was predominantly conservative and was never radically anti-capitalist. Soviet propaganda focussed on Nazi militarism, racism and authoritarianism – which were far from being mythical.

8. HB: What impact did the “Phoney War” have on Soviet plans? Is there any connection to the Winter War?

GR: From Stalin’s point of view Britain and France’s phoney war with Germany 1939-1940 was highly dangerous because it meant the power of the great capitalist states remained intact and he feared that, after Poland’s fall, Anglo-French appeasers would do a deal with Hitler and re-direct German expansionism eastward, in the Soviet direction.

During the Winter War, the British and French organised an expeditionary force to aid the embattled Finns. Part of the plan was to seize control of Sweden’s iron fields en route to Finland – an action that would have spread the European war to Scandinavia, since Hitler could not allow such a vital resource to fall into the hands of his enemies. The Swedes were horrified by such a scenario so they put pressure on Finland to make peace with the USSR. This suited Stalin since he didn’t want to be sucked into the wider war either. The March 1940 peace treaty gave Stalin what he wanted in terms of territory and military bases but saved Finland from full Soviet occupation. When Hitler attacked the USSR, Finland launched a ‘Continuation War’ to regain its lost territories. Finland claimed to be a co-belligerent of Hitler’s rather than an ally, but it was a distinction without difference for the Soviets given the Finns’ role in the prolonged blockade of Leningrad – which resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths.

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only that camp defends this position, or is it also upheld by historians outside that tradition?

GR: Historians of all kinds of political persuasion agree that the USSR was the primary victor of the Second World War, in the sense that the Soviets bore the brunt of the war with Nazi Germany and the Soviet-German struggle was the epicentre of the whole conflict. But it was also common victory over Hitler by grand alliance of states and peoples. The USSR might have been able to defeat Germany on its own but Britain, the United States and other countries made vital contributions that saved the lives of millions of Soviet soldiers.

10. HB: Poland is often portrayed as an innocent victim of the joint German-Sov aggression of 1939. Do you believe this narrative oversimplifies Poland's role in interwar politics? What other aspects of Polish diplomacy of that period deserve to be considered?

GR: The Poles sought to balance between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. They also thought that British and French support would enable them to survive being attacked by either or both of their big neighbours. They would have done better for themselves with the Soviets, who in 1939 were striving for a triple alliance with Britain and France that would protect the whole of Europe from further German expansionism.

The Soviets' triple alliance project failed because the Poles would not give advance consent to the Red Army's passage across their territory in the event of war with Germany. It was the failure of the triple alliance negotiations that prompted Stalin to turn to a deal with Hitler and sign the Soviet-German non-aggression treaty on 23 August 1939.

It's not certain that Hitler would have been deterred from war by a successful

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11. HB: Throughout your career, you have received criticism from historians and reviewers who accuse you of being too lenient toward Stalin — of presenting “revisionist” image that minimizes the dictator’s responsibility for mass repression and for the strategic errors of the period. How do you respond to accusation of bias?

GR: I have never minimised Stalin’s responsibility for mass repression or made excuses for his mistakes. Nor have I ever avoided any difficult issue in relation to Stalin. Quite the contrary. If you go to my website – www.geoffreyroberts.net – you will, for example, find several articles about ‘Stalin’s Terror’ – all which are focused on his personal responsibilities. But terror and dictatorship is not the whole story of Stalin and his regime.

12. HB: Still on this point: you describe your method as understanding Stalin “through his own eyes,” seeking empathy without lapsing into sympathy. Where do you draw the line between historically understanding a leader and, inadvertently, absolving him?

GR: In the end, I rely on my readers’ intelligence and commonsense to grasp the difference between empathy and sympathy and to see that my sole purpose is a greater understanding of Stalin.

Closing

13. HB: Finally, for Brazilian readers who are now discovering your work for the first time: why does Stalin remain, more than seventy years after his death, such a central — and such a contested — figure for understanding the twentieth century?

GR: Stalin had a huge impact on the 20th century world and his successes and ex-

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more popular, more alive, than ever. Elsewhere, Stalin is more of a historical figure but no less fascinating.

Our special thanks to Geoffrey Roberts for accepting our request for an interview; he always very cordial and responsive to our messages.

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