



Global Bookmark

Stalin's War and Peace

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Sean McMeekin, *Stalin's War: A New History of World War II*, Allen Lane, London; Basic Books, New York, 2021.

Jonathan Haslam, *The Spectre of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II*, Princeton University Press, 2021.

Norman M. Naimark, *Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty*, Harvard University Press, 2019.

Francine Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg: A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

MOSCOW – From the 2008 war in Georgia to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the build-up of troops along Ukraine's eastern and southern borders just this spring, Russia's actions in recent years have been increasingly worrying. Could history – in particular, the behavior of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union after World War II – give Western leaders the insights they need to mitigate the threat?

The authors of several recent books about Stalin seem to think so. But not everyone gets the story right. Instead, modern observers often fall into the trap of reshaping history to fit prevailing ideological molds. This has fed an often-sensationalized narrative that is not only unhelpful, but that also plays into Russian President Vladimir Putin's hands.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the perception, popular in the West, that Putin is a strategic genius – always thinking several moves ahead. Somehow, Putin anticipates his

Western foes' tactical mistakes and is invariably well prepared to take advantage of them. As a result, he is not only one of the world's most powerful autocrats, but also among its most effective spoilers. Much like Stalin.

That is certainly a flattering take on Putin. But is it realistic?

Stalinist Revisionism

Virtually every sentence of Sean McMeekin's new book, *Stalin's War: A New History of World War II*, seems to confirm Stalin's preternatural strategic brilliance. In McMeekin's view, the war was not, as many believe, driven by the villainous Adolf Hitler. "German aggression" never reached Asia during the war, McMeekin points out, and Hitler's legacy has done little to shape today's world.



WWII was not, therefore, Hitler's war. It was, as the book's title indicates, Stalin's. After all, it was Stalin's empire that spanned the Eurasian continent. It was Stalin who wanted Japan to inflict devastation on his "Anglo-Saxon" capitalist foes. And it was Stalin who enjoyed the spoils of victory. The legacy of WWII endures not only in Russia's ongoing claim to Japan's northern Kuril Islands, but also in the communist governments of China, North Korea, and Vietnam.

So, McMeekin casually declares, everything we thought we knew about WWII is wrong. We don't know when it really began or ended. We have never known about Stalin's "well-laid plans" to advance communism by coordinating "warring capitalist factions" with the skill of a puppet master. And we have never understood how he "manipulated" Britain and the United States along the way. Until now.

Thanks to McMeekin, apparently, we are finally getting the real story. For example, we never knew – until McMeekin arrived to tell us – that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt were essentially complicit in the Soviet Union's imperial expansion because they did not allow Hitler and Stalin to slug it out on their own.

In fact, the author claims, Churchill easily could have stopped the war in 1940, if only he

had had the sense to come to terms with Hitler and sign an agreement to divide up spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, as Stalin did with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939. That way, a united “Western” front – including Nazi Germany – could have confronted the Soviet threat (as many argue the West should confront Putin’s Russia). Instead, the British and Americans chose Stalin as their partner – and condemned millions of people to “decades of oppression and new forms of terror.”

McMeekin is right that this is a “new history.” But his revisionism is stunning for its utter disregard for prevailing political conditions, the situation on the ground, and the basic reality of war. Perhaps McMeekin’s next book should be an “alternative” history examining the social and political consequences of handing part of Europe over to the Nazis.

McMeekin purports to back his fantastical claims with extensive new research in Russian, European, and US archives. But interpreting and organizing one’s research to support the claims one brings to it is not hard to do. I work in the archives myself – I am trying to reconstruct the rise to power of my great-grandfather, Nikita Khrushchev – and know firsthand how information can be manipulated to fit an ideological mold.

And there is little doubt about McMeekin’s ideological leanings. His fixation on Russia as reprobate animated his earlier book, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, which blames the country for World War I. Apparently, had it not been for Russia, the Great War could have remained a “local” Balkan conflict. If the shoe doesn’t fit, *make* it fit.

Weighing in at some 800 pages, *Stalin’s War* compiles an impressive amount of historical information. But, given McMeekin’s procrustean framework, it comes across as cluelessly arrogant. This sense is reinforced by the book’s rather glib dedication: “For the victims.” The author, a professor at Bard College, seems to believe that he is somehow delivering justice to those who suffered during WWII – and those who suffered its consequences.

If you want to believe that Stalin – who neither anticipated Hitler’s abrogation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in June 1941, nor initially believed reports that the Nazis had crossed the Soviet frontier – was practically omniscient, this is the book for you. But it cannot change the truth – including the widely agreed conclusion that Stalin’s USSR (like Putin’s Russia) have influenced the world mostly through tactics and opportunism, not well-laid strategic plans.

The Party and the Peace

If Stalin was not, as McMeekin suggests, all-seeing and practically all-knowing, the revolutionary instability that his policies incited were nevertheless a clear catalyst for WWII, both in Europe and Asia. That insight is but one of many that Jonathan Haslam of the Institute for Advanced Study and the University of Cambridge brings to his monumental study of communism’s role in shaping international politics between the world wars.

For Haslam, a defining element in the growing instability and insecurity of the late 1920s and 1930s was the struggle to build communism in one country. This was Stalin's seminal policy response after the failure of Germany or any other European country to follow in the footsteps of the Bolshevik Revolution left the new Soviet Union as the world's only socialist state.

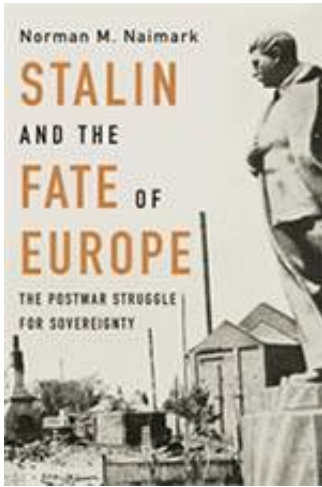


Haslam traces Stalin's project from the construction of the Comintern, with its tentacles reaching into the politics of every Western democracy, to the decision to supply China's infant communist party, which in turn provoked a bloody break with Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang, to the USSR's intervention in the Spanish Civil War. What Haslam accurately captures is the dialectic within which every effort that the Soviet Union made to enhance its security brought forth an equal – and often more violent – opposing response, once Mussolini's Fascists and Hitler's Nazis had come to power in Italy and Germany.

Where McMeekin and Haslam would agree, I suspect, is in the degree to which the West misread Stalin. In the struggle with Trotsky, Haslam notes, Stalin was “the man the Foreign Office much preferred.” They would also probably agree on the degree of contempt in which Stalin held the West, which he deemed as “too incompetent” to launch its own socialist revolutions and thus would need “direct military assistance” from the Soviet Union.

The Accidental Cold War?

Norman M. Naimark, a distinguished Stanford University historian, understands just how instrumental contempt-fueled opportunism was for Stalin as well as for the party he led. In *Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty*, he makes clear that “there is very little evidence that Stalin had a preconceived plan for creating a bloc of countries in Europe with a common Soviet-style system.” After practically getting whiplash from shaking my head at McMeekin's book, Naimark's work – with its substantially less grandiose scope and megalomaniacal claims – provided a steadying antidote.



Naimark advances a more realistic historiography, backed by more objectively compiled and deliberately interpreted research. Without dismissing Stalin's ruthlessness and cunning tactics, he notes that the primary goal was to ensure "security for the Soviet Union." In the short term, that meant ensuring that Germany not be "rearmed or rendered capable of carrying out another invasion" of the USSR, and that "countries of east central Europe not serve as willing helpmates in such a war."

Stalin did want to expand the Soviet Union's influence in Europe, Naimark writes, but he had no "road map for the development of a socialist continent." Instead, he probably imagined that Central and Western European countries "would develop into different constellations of people's democratic governments, ruled by coalitions of the left and center, including communist parties, that would gradually stabilize their respective societies and rebuild their economies."

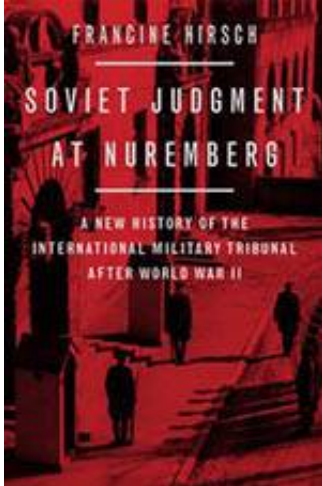
In other words, Stalin did not want to foment socialist revolutions in Europe. In the United Kingdom, for example, he seemed to think that parliamentarism could evolve peacefully toward socialism. There was, therefore, no need for a "dictatorship of the proletariat," no need for a violent revolution, and no need for bloodshed." His approach to Poland – essentially allowing them to choose their own allies and work toward a "new democracy" – lends support to this reading.

Moreover, Stalin was not "anxious to alienate the Americans and British by assisting in the elimination of noncommunist parties of the left and center." A "worldwide shoving match" with the US was never part of the plan. The power, prestige, and influence Stalin's USSR enjoyed after WWII simply caused the West to become increasingly "overwhelmed by ideological hostility." If the resentment and fear of the Soviet Union had been less absolute, Naimark suggests, Soviet behavior could have been more measured.

The Judgment of Stalin

Francine Hirsch's *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg* echoes Naimark's portrayal of Stalin as more of an improviser and opportunist than a strategic savant. But Hirsch, a professor of

history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, offers an even more refined – and compelling – narrative of the postwar interactions between the Soviet Union and the West.



Don't let the title fool you. This is no dry history of the origins of the International Military Tribunal (IMT) that sat in Nuremberg after WWII. On the contrary, the book grips you from the start, when it tells the story of Roman Karmen, the influential Soviet documentarian whose film *Judgment of the Peoples* portrayed the trials (and whom I knew when I was a child).

More broadly, by examining the joint effort to prosecute the Nazi leaders for war crimes, Hirsch's book clarifies the foundations of our collective understanding of the concepts of "transitional justice, international law, genocide, and human rights." In the process, Hirsch highlights what she believes has been missing from accounts of the Nuremberg Trials: the Soviet Union's central role. In fact, Hirsch writes, the USSR was critical to the IMT's success, "setting in motion what has become widely regarded as a revolution in international law that criminalized wars of conquest and sought to protect individuals from repressive states."

Not surprisingly, this process was not without its tensions. As Hirsch explains, the US, the UK, France, and the USSR had conflicting ideas about "the very meaning of justice and how it should be served." The prosecutors and judges from each of the four countries had "competing ideas about even such basic matters as evidence, witnesses, and the rights of the defendants."

Furthermore, "all of the Allies were intent on using the trials to put forward their own history of the war and to shape the postwar future." The sharpest clash was between the Soviets, who wanted to make clear that they had "saved Europe from Hitler," and the Americans, who remained adamant that their country was "Europe's liberator and protector." In this sense, the Nuremberg Trials became "an early front of the Cold War," taking place at a moment when the postwar relationship between the Americans and the Soviets was "still largely unformed."

The US won that round, not least because of its skillful public relations. The Soviet effort, by contrast, failed miserably: far from elaborating “a narrative about Soviet heroism and German treachery,” as intended, the Soviets “found themselves cast as co-conspirators of the Nazi regime – denied both the respect of victory and the self-righteousness of victimhood.”

It helped that America’s strong legal tradition was essential to ensure that the Nazi defendants received fair and credible trials, rather than Stalinesque show trials. But, as Hirsch makes clear, that does not mean that the US deserves nearly as much credit as it claims.

As the American Society of International Law noted in awarding Hirsch’s book a Certificate of Merit, two “awkward truths” emerge from the full story of the Nuremberg Trials: “illiberal authoritarian states have at times positively shaped international law, and international justice is an inherently political process.”

From Stalin to Putin

One thing all these books get right in theory, if not in execution, is that the lessons of history can and should inform the West’s dealings with Russia today. One key lesson lies in how much credit Western leaders give the country.

Even McMeekin’s account, which assigns such great strategic guile to Russia’s leadership, shows just how difficult it has been for the country to sustain its influence over others. This suggests that the West has often overestimated Russia’s strength and strategic adroitness.

At the same time, the West has been known to underestimate Russia greatly. This has led it not only to antagonize Russia, such as with the expansion of NATO in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but also to condescend to it, as former US President Barack Obama did in 2014 when he referred to Russia as a “regional power.” Such Western behavior lent credence to Putin’s claims that the West was not only disrespecting Russia, but also actively undermining its national interests, and may have invited confrontation, much like Naimark suggests occurred after WWII.

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If this is true, Western leaders should take Russia’s interests – especially its security interests – more seriously. If they did, they just might find a willing partner. Of course, it is impossible to know for sure. But Naimark’s examination of Stalin’s postwar maneuvers – including in Yugoslavia and Finland in 1944-48, during the Italian general elections in 1948, and the Berlin blockade of 1948-49 – suggests that it could be worth a shot. In all of those cases, Stalin’s actions reflected complex thinking, flexibility of purpose, and willingness to cooperate.

As Naimark and Hirsch convincingly argue, the Cold War may not have been inevitable.

Likewise, it may be possible to ease today's tensions between Putin's Russia and the West. For that to happen, however, both sides must, as they did during the Nuremberg Trials, "work hard to find common ground."

NINA L. KHRUSHCHEVA

Nina L. Khrushcheva, Professor of International Affairs at The New School, is the co-author (with Jeffrey Tayler), most recently, of *In Putin's Footsteps: Searching for the Soul of an Empire Across Russia's Eleven Time Zones*.

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