

STALIN'S WAR: A NEW HISTORY OF WORLD WAR II

(SEAN MCMEEKIN)

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We are not a serious society. Our ruling class are men of no substance, lacking all knowledge and incapable of competent action on any front. The masses, while they sense a great deal is very wrong, are distracted by propaganda and ephemera. We feel we can afford to be unserious, because all of us lead lives of unprecedented material comfort. Any lack is eased by speedy delivery of sedatives designed to mask and hold down chthonic spiritual despair. To be sure, we do not lack for heralds of the coming storm—but we, high and low, have forgotten what a storm looks like. Read this book and you will remember, and you will also know what it is to live in a serious society.

Sean McMeekin, the author of *Stalin's War*, has made a career out of what are often called revisionist histories, all about the first half of the twentieth century, several about Russia. I was suitably impressed by his *The Russian Revolution*, but that, and this, book are not really revisionist histories. Rather, they are correctives to the disinformation that has been most English-language histories tied to Communism during the past hundred years, and they seem revisionist because they discuss the facts objectively. The philo-Communists who to this day operate the academic wing of our regime's propaganda machine dislike this, so they complain McMeekin is revisionist, a turn of phrase that suggests inaccuracy without needing to demonstrate any inaccuracy.

The author chose the title because World War II, in his view and contrary to what we are endlessly told, was less Adolf Hitler's war than Joseph Stalin's war. McMeekin does not mean the commonplace that Stalin's Russia absorbed the majority of the Allied side's deaths of the war (in fact, he seems to suspect historians have exaggerated Soviet war deaths). Rather, he means that the war was desired by Stalin, as a direct result of his Marxist-Leninist principles, largely followed the course Stalin wanted and acted to achieve, and hugely benefitted Stalin, while benefitting nobody else at all. In other words, *cui bono*? Stalin, unfortunately for the entire world.

This is, no surprise, a copiously footnoted and documented book, including what McMeekin says is a large amount of new information.

Interestingly, at several points McMeekin complains that after the fall of Soviet Communism, archives were opened which contained very valuable data that has since become unavailable. He also notes that several Russian military historians write under pseudonyms, "to avoid government scrutiny." But he does not explain the government's reason, which is a little odd. Maybe it's just that Vladimir Putin prefers the heroic myth of the Great Patriotic War, and books like this, and the facts on which they are based, are inconvenient.

McMeekin goes through the stages of World War II, but he begins by going all the way back to 1917 and the years immediately following, when the Bolshevik regime set the invariant pattern for all its future interactions with the West. It combined duplicity with opportunism, always overlaid with the crucial goal of fomenting Communist revolution in the West, and in this effort was greatly aided by allies, some traitors, some mere fellow-travelers, who occupied crucial positions throughout the West. In fact, without massive aid from the West, mostly the fruit of turncoats or dupes in America and also in Britain, the Soviet Union would almost certainly not have been able to survive—not in World War II, and for that matter not later, though that is a topic for another book, and another day. The cast of characters changed from 1917 to 1945; the pattern did not.

Communist hopes for immediate world revolution dwindled in the 1920s, after the Poles defeated the Red Army and the Germans put down their traitors such as Rosa Luxembourg, but still, revolution always remained near to the hearts of both Soviet leadership and their innumerable allies in the West. By the end of the 1920s, Stalin had emerged victorious from the internal Soviet power struggle, exiling Leon Trotsky and using his skill at the boring work of bureaucratic power building to build a slick machine, grounded in terror and wholly ideological in focus. Thus, in 1928, Stalin (through the Comintern) inaugurated the Third Period, where global Communism was to return to the offensive. He demanded an uncompromising approach and direct action by the world's Communists, and he got it. This was the period when Communists outside Russia refused to cooperate with other parties of the Left in any matter, loudly declaiming, for example, that socialists were merely "social fascists," and worked tirelessly to advance the interests of the Soviet Union at the expense of their own country.

Meanwhile, at home, Stalin was furiously industrializing, while at the same time massacring kulaks, starving millions of Ukrainians, and filling the gulags with slave labor for his industrialization program. None of his industrialization would have been possible without immense Western help; American firms in particular eagerly designed and built many of Stalin's important factories, most notably the entire new steel-producing city of Magnitogorsk, as well as crucial infrastructure such as power plants. (American expatriates working on these Soviet projects were so numerous they had their own English-language newspaper.) At this point, the Americans wouldn't yet simply hand over military design secrets—so Stalin initiated a giant spy operation, with its biggest focus being United States aviation. All this made Stalin's military power grow by leaps and bounds—his prime goal, because without military supremacy, Communist global domination could not be assured.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the United States still did not recognize the Soviet regime diplomatically. This meant, among other things, that Stalin could not borrow American money, and was certainly not getting direct aid. Thus all American private assistance was paid for in gold and by Stalin selling or trading stolen artwork and antiquities. Moreover, Soviet tensions with Japan were increasing rapidly—but this presented an opening, because American tensions with Japan were also increasing, providing an apparent common interest. When Franklin Roosevelt, who had always been friendly to Communism and Communists, took office in 1933, Stalin was elated. Although the American people were (and remained) strongly opposed to Communism, the gullible Roosevelt was easily convinced that normalizing relations with Stalin would boost the American economy, something more than usually crucial due to the Great Depression. As McMeekin points out, Roosevelt naively thought the problem was that it needed someone like him just to talk to the Russians to “straighten out this whole question,” and that the Russians weren't buying American goods because of political objections, not because they had nothing with which to buy American goods.

Setting the model for his behavior for the next twelve years, Roosevelt immediately gave away the entire farm, and then some. He gladly recognized the Soviet Union, over the strong objections of the State Department, and refused to ask for anything from Stalin in return, such as repayment of existing debts, or ending Communist spying and

subversion (by which America, and the American government, was riddled—including by Harry Dexter White, a Soviet agent who throughout Roosevelt's presidency was the right-hand man of Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau). For this reason, and because he saw little wrong with Communism and a great deal wrong with National Socialism, Roosevelt's administration adopted and retained a consistent pro-Soviet line, in both personnel (for example replacing the ambassador to Moscow, William Bullitt, who had a realistic appreciation of Soviet "deception and guile," with a Soviet toady, Joseph Davies, who "saw unicorns") and policy (as we will see).

Meanwhile, in 1935, Stalin adopted a new external doctrine, that of the Popular Front—where Communists allied with other parties of the Left, invariably with the intent of, and usually succeeding in, taking all power by force if able to win an election. In both Spain and France in 1936 this strategy was successful (although not long-term, stopped by Francisco Franco in Spain, and by the war in France). Stalin also pushed "collective security"—the idea that the nations of the West should cooperate to restrain Hitler, to Stalin's benefit. The goal of all policies was, with zero exceptions, to further Communist triumph and domination; any particular announced policy would be ignored, modified, or rejected as necessary to that end. If there is a single historical fact that emerges clearly from the pages of this book, it is the total dishonesty and duplicity of all Soviet actions, something not taken into account by most diplomats and leaders of Western nations, whose credulousness and refusal to take into account past Soviet treachery encouraged even more bad behavior by Stalin.

One could look at it another way, however. Only Stalin acted consistently in a way to benefit what he saw as the interests of the Soviet Union, without any reference to, or thought for, the morality of his actions. Only power and practicality existed for him, filtered, to be sure, through Communist ideology, but that never placed any limit on taking advantage of the West. Roosevelt, and Churchill to a lesser extent, evinced the perpetual difficulty of the Anglosphere in dealing with Communism—even when not crippled by Soviet subversion, their governments approached dealings with Stalin through the prism of a personal relationship, acting in good faith with a strong moral overlay borrowed from the Christian obligations of the individual. You would

think they should have learned early this was a mistake, and you would be right, but that's what they did—even Ronald Reagan did, although he did it a lot less, and was rewarded by achieving his geostrategic goals.

If there is a villain in this book, it's not Stalin, though McMeekin certainly has no love for him, but seems to regard Stalin's ability to manipulate the Allies, never giving an inch or showing any reciprocity, mostly with a kind of detached horror. Rather, it is Roosevelt, with his satanic familiar Harry Hopkins, who, while probably not a Communist agent, acted in a way indistinguishable from one, consistently prioritizing Soviet interests over American ones. McMeekin quotes Roosevelt, "I just have a hunch that Stalin isn't that kind of man. Harry [Hopkins] said he's not and that he doesn't want anything but security for his country, and I think that if I give him everything I can and ask for nothing in return, *noblesse oblige*, he won't try to annex anything and will work with me for a world of democracy and peace." Most of the book is an explication of this theme.

As the 1930s drew to a close, though, Stalin spent a lot more time negotiating with Hitler than with Roosevelt. McMeekin details the steps leading up to the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, as well as Stalin's simultaneous negotiations with the British and the French. Stalin's aim was to further a war between the Germans and the Western powers, the sooner the better; he believed this would be a grinding slugfest from which he could profit by picking up the pieces. Getting the party started by seizing much of Poland, as agreed upon with Hitler, was very agreeable to him. Less agreeable to him was the speed with which Hitler rolled up his half of Poland. Yet, before and after the invasion, Stalin punctiliously continued to fulfil promised enormous shipments of raw materials, most especially oil, to Hitler (for which he was paid cash), which enabled Hitler to advance his plans in the West, in the face of the British blockade.

Stalin promptly also invaded Poland (along with the Baltic states), and by 1941 had murdered around 500,000 Poles (and tens of thousands of Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians), which, as McMeekin points out, was "three or four times higher than the number of those killed by the Nazis"—although Hitler caught up later by killing Polish Jews. Stalin's atrocities included the murder of the flower of Polish society in the Katyn Forest, but at no time did any Western government, not the

British under Churchill and even less America under Roosevelt, criticize Stalin's murderous ways, instead toadying to him in hopes he would help against Hitler. As McMeekin points out, by mid-1940 Stalin had invaded as many sovereign countries as Hitler (seven), with barely a whisper about it being raised by the American government.

Stalin did help against Hitler—at a very high price and on terms always radically favorable to him. Stalin gradually let his close relationship with Hitler deteriorate, and refused to join the Tripartite Pact, even when Hitler was at his zenith. Hitler resisted further Russian expansion at the expense of Rumania and Bulgaria; tensions rose. Stalin was confident; despite the debilities caused by the officer purges of the previous decade, the Red Army had far more tanks, artillery, planes, and other equipment than the Wehrmacht (including even five times as many submarines), and a three-to-one advantage in manpower, the result of Stalin's aggressive buildup. Nor was this inferior equipment—much of it was based on designs stolen or bought from the Americans, including parts of the famous T-34 tank. What Stalin missed was that the Germans were far, far better at planning, logistics, and mobile war, and that German morale was far higher than Soviet.

Did Stalin always intend to attack Hitler, and Hitler just beat him to it? Or, as most historians have said, was Stalin surprised? The notable exponent of the former theory is the Russian historian Viktor Suvarov; McMeekin nods to him but does not endorse his theory, though at least to some degree he tends in that direction. Much of Stalin's buildup in 1940 and early 1941 seemed designed for offense—such as the crash building of innumerable airfields directly behind the new Soviet borders gained in the preceding few years, and other infrastructure designed to allow easy movement past the front (all of which was ultimately made nugatory by its immediate capture by the Germans). This could, however, also be read as over-optimistic preparation for a counterattack, or as an attempt to deter aggression by showing strength. McMeekin does not come to a conclusion—but he most definitely comes to the conclusion that Stalin was not taken by surprise, and he did not suffer some type of mental breakdown when Hitler invaded, a later myth pushed by Stalin's successors.

As is well known, the Germans smashed the Soviets, destroying nearly all of Stalin's military equipment, and came very close to winning the

war outright. But not close enough, and winter came, with Stalin staying in Moscow, pondering what to do. It was not that Stalin could not be a realist. He famously folded his cards when the Finns punched him repeatedly in the nose (if you count 200,000 dead Russians as a punch in the nose). It was that the Americans never gave him any reason to do other than he did, and what made his recovery possible was America.

In March, 1941, Congress had passed Lend-Lease, to allow the President to distribute material, from cobalt to tanks, to nations opposing Hitler. Until Hitler attacked Stalin, Roosevelt and his aides had been largely prevented by American public opinion, which unlike Roosevelt cared about Stalin's murderous ways and saw little difference between Hitler and Stalin, from supplying Stalin as they wished. But the perception, made completely real by Hitler declaring war on the United States in December, that Hitler was now the aggressor, allowed Roosevelt's coterie to open the floodgates—saving Stalin in the nick of time. Using endless shipments of raw materials, chemicals, tanks, and planes, delivered at great risk and cost by Americans to Arctic ports, Stalin managed to resist, then push back, Hitler.

Thus, the second half of this book is taken up with a nearly endless catalog of the astonishingly huge amounts of material given gratis to Stalin (while Britain was forced to pay through the nose for much less aid), often at the expense of American readiness; the constant super-aggressive demands of the Soviet Communists for more; the eager meeting of those demands by Roosevelt's aides for whom the Soviet Union was at least as important as America; the constant sidelining of and lying to anyone who proposed limits on aid to Stalin, or any kind of payment, oversight, or quid pro quo; and how this aid prevented Stalin from losing the war in 1942 and enabled him to ultimately conquer half of Europe.

Much of this seems unbelievable. Soviet agents literally freely roamed America "requisitioning" whatever they wanted, including crucial components such as ball bearings, resulting in shortages for America. "Soviet purchasing agents had such influence in the Roosevelt administration that they functioned, for all intents and purposes, like members of the US government." America transferred scores of entire factories to the Soviet Union, along with their intellectual property, even when those factories could not be brought online for some years, and obviously

could only be useful to Stalin after the war. And much more along these lines. The usual argument in defense of these practices is that enabling the Russians to kill Germans meant fewer Americans would die. Maybe. But McMeekin points out that not only was the aid excessive, Stalin was never asked for, or gave, anything at all in return. Moreover, these shipments (always at solely American expense and risk) continued, and even increased, up until the very end of the war, when Stalin was rolling up Europe.

Regardless of the actual reasons for this one-sided giveaway, which were probably some combination of Soviet discipline, the perfidy of American traitors, and typical Rooseveltian gullibility, the war ground on. McMeekin covers the fighting in detail, with a focus on Stalin's military actions, and finally, we get to the last stages of the war, during which Stalin obtained nearly all of his prewar aims. Along the way, McMeekin also covers many other topics. These include Russia's relationship with Japan (you probably did not know there was a Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact, to which Stalin rigidly hewed until after Hiroshima), and how Stalin used Harry Dexter White and his pawn, Morgenthau, to advance the Soviet goal of increasing tensions between the United States and Japan, successfully encouraging a war. They also include Roosevelt's cooperation in concealing Stalin's many crimes, including most notably Katyn, and a long catalog of American (and British) cooperation in Stalin's other betrayals, from Draža Mihailovich to the Warsaw Uprising. I will note that this is a daunting book, in that it is 800 pages, including the notes. It's a very easy read, however, because McMeekin is an excellent writer. Don't let the length scare you.

The apogee of Soviet influence in Washington was the promulgation in 1944 of the so-called Morgenthau Plan, to primitivize Germany for the benefit of the Soviet Union, and to likely kill by starvation as many as thirty million Germans. This was drafted and presented by Soviet agents, including but not limited to White, to Morgenthau as it became clear that Germany would lose the war. You would think being Secretary of the Treasury would not be a relevant position for deciding such matters of world-historical importance, but Morgenthau was socially and politically very close to Roosevelt. And, being a vindictive man, himself Jewish, Morgenthau strongly endorsed the plan fed to him. Almost nobody else in Washington, or at least anyone not in bed

with Stalin, thought the plan was other than insane—except the dying Roosevelt, who was all for it, and given how he had used his power to benefit Stalin throughout the war, might have been able to do the same here. He did manage to coerce Churchill, by threats, into endorsing it. When the plan leaked, though, Roosevelt was forced to lie that he had not seen and endorsed (in fact signed) it, because the November 1944 election was around the corner, and Americans as a whole strongly opposed it. Nonetheless, Stalin still benefitted, because exposure of the plan, along with Roosevelt's (hard to explain) demands for unconditional surrender, ensured fiercer resistance to the Americans on the Western front, allowing Stalin to roll up far more territory in the East.

In the final days of the war and afterwards, Stalin manipulated his allies at Teheran, Potsdam, and Yalta, where he yet again got essentially everything he wanted, including the continuation of massive aid, even though that no longer offered any benefit to his allies. At the same time, Stalin systematically plundered the industrial plant of all areas under his control, along with artwork and anything else of value, while raping and slaughtering millions, all without any objection from Roosevelt. And, finally, Stalin took advantage of American sacrifice, and the atomic bomb, to grab a great deal of territory in Asia, at zero risk and cost to himself—though Roosevelt's death, and Harry Truman's accession to power, limited Stalin's grab to some degree, given that Roosevelt had been, in effect, eager to give Stalin all of Korea and parts of Japan. At the end, Stalin was sitting pretty, and here is where McMeekin leaves the story.

And so what? What's done is done, I suppose. But we can learn about the future from a proper appreciation of the past, never more so than when one lives in an unserious and uneducated society, as we do. McMeekin, while adverting to the dubious nature of counterfactuals, suggests it might have been better, and could not likely have been worse, had America simply let Stalin and Hitler fight it out, with Stalin almost certainly losing without American aid. He rejects as the broken-window fallacy that the war brought America out of the Depression, and notes that not only did America pay in lives for a war in which Stalin was the clear victor, in "both territory and booty," but got "erosion of their own civil liberties, with an ever-expanding security state contrary to the country's founding principles and stated ideals, which bears

increasing resemblance to the Soviet version they struggled against.” Very true, as we look around. Who would have thought in 1990 that in 2021 we would live in a regime with Communist-level propaganda and the technology to push it far more than Stalin ever could have?

Yet in this counterfactual, I suspect the West would have ended up in the same dismal situation it is in today. After all, those few examples of Western countries that mostly avoided involvement in the horrors of the twentieth century are no better off than America or Britain. Franco's success, for example, did Spain no good in the long run. And look at Ireland, which today is a dying country, completely shattered, with no children, a ruling class that welcomes invasion by millions of aliens, and a totalitarian, hyperfeminized reaction to the Wuhan Plague. This indicates that the root of Western collapse lies deeper, a wrong turn taken earlier, than World War II, or even World War I. Still, what we can learn from this book is that treating with the Left, any branch of the Left, as if they are capable of acting in good faith, rather than with mendacious duplicity, is a grave mistake. And also that the frequent natural state of man is conflict with existential stakes, something which seems very far away now. But that is an optical illusion, you will realize, if you read this book. As in your car's rearview mirror, objects may be closer than they appear.