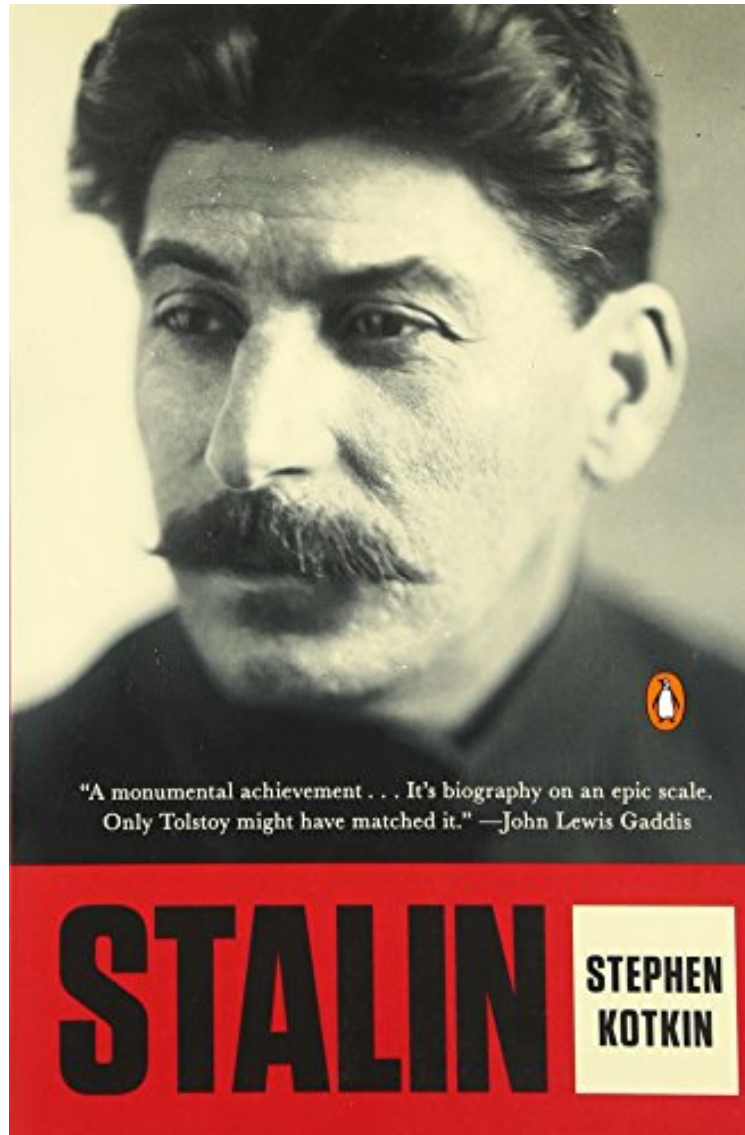


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## Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928

Stephen Kotkin

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#120412 in Books Kotkin Stephen 2015-10-13 2015-10-13 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.95 x 2.10 x 6.05l, 2.01 #File Name: 0143127861976 pages Stalin Paradoxes of Power 1878 1928 | File size: 15.Mb

**Stephen Kotkin : Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928:

137 of 146 people found the following review helpful. A Dictator's Life; A Scholar's Life's Work By Laurence R. Bachmann Any review of Stephen Kotkin's Stalin is like a reproduction of great artwork: it in no way will reflect the depth, color or texture of the original, which is nothing short brilliant. Like all classics in the genre, Kotkin's biography is a many layered and nuanced portrait of both a man and an era; a person and a people; a hero and a villain. If Stalin

deteriorated into murderous sociopathy, he was not always so. Sometimes he was incredibly brave, clinging to his convictions with resolve and courage. Usually detached, and always willing to use men for his purpose and women for his needs, Kotkin captures the boundless dichotomy in this smart, always ambitious man. One who begins with good, even noble intent and along the way trades principle for power; compassion for control. In the end, perhaps the author's greatest accomplishment is to show how the most seemingly ordinary men are capable of extraordinary evil; how sheer force of will can change history. Stalin is constructed like a jigsaw puzzle. Kotkin fills in the borders and the edges first, framing his subject in the context of 19th century Imperial Russia; a Georgian with few advantages having to assert, excel and assimilate to get ahead. He hews closely to known facts, avoiding conjecture. As a result, in the first 150 pages there is surprising little Stalin in Stalin. Rather than pop psych musings that link a drunken father's abuse to mass murder, Kotkin puts his subject in the context of the time. He examines how suffocatingly autocratic Imperial Russian Society happened to be with the Orthodox Church Stalin's only potential escape route. A bright and eager adolescent idealizes his church entering the seminary only to find himself in a de facto boot camp that brooked no opposition, stifled all curiosity. The portrait of this suffocatingly conservative culture is wonderfully drawn. Here's a real life Oliver Twist asking not for more gruel but more knowledge, ideas, stimulation and being battered for his impudence. The question becomes not why would you, but why wouldn't you want to overthrow this dessicated, putrescent crowd of toadies, leeches and mediocrities that hold you back and literally will bleed you dry. I was pleased Kotkin didn't truck with Romanov sentimentalists who distort history by linking it to an imaginary, glorious past. The author makes clear Nicky Clan choreographed their own demise. Tsarist handmaidens such as the Orthodox Church, the nobility and elite were their own worst enemy. Like our slave owning aristocracy 50 years earlier, Russian autocrats stubbornly clung to cruel and vicious privilege. If they were ruthlessly expunged, it was a lesson learned at their knee. Disproving the claim imitation is the highest form of flattery. Occasionally it can be lethal. There are marvelous portraits of the multitude of players that made up the Russian Revolution. A preening Kerensky--faux democrat, faux savior, faux genius. Vladimir Illych. The ruthless master of disguise who could mask his intent even more cleverly than his appearance. And who once in power, held on to it like a bulldog with a bone. The portrait of Trotsky was among my favorite. Brilliant at so many things, overconfidence and his inability to assess his opponents proved fatal. It is among these luminaries that Stalin hones his skills. The Bolshevik putsch and Lenin's brazen and full-out assault on democracy are object lessons that would never be forgotten--only improved upon. Many critics of the regime refuse to see any good in their character or programs. Kotkin is not so dismissive of Sverdlov, Trotsky, Lenin and Stalin, pointing out that among them they spent decades in prison and being hounded when out of it simply for hating the Imperial regime. When the Romanovs fell only the Bolsheviks had the courage and will to oppose Russia continuation in the ruinous Great War that was devastating millions. Though one can certainly fault Trotsky for mucking up a reasonable peace settlement with Germany, Stalin and Lenin early and often spoke of the need to relieve Russia's misery. To paraphrase another great biography: "Let Us Now Praise (briefly) Famous Monsters." Kotkin is unafraid to say they were courageous and at times prescient in their observations and planning. It is brave of him to do so--there will be a coterie of critics who like the truth varnished to suit politics. While giving praise where it is due he also notes what an unlikely gang of thugs and lugheads they happened to be. To gain control of the country's finances they basically robbed banks and shook down the rich. With absolutely no financial experience but a pressing need to manage the debt incurred by the Great War and Tsar, they simply cancelled the debt, welching on Russia's IOUs. In solving one problem it created a multitude of others that would haunt the Soviet people for generations. Amidst it all was Stalin: doggedly, determinedly carving a place for himself. Sverdlov's genius organization; Lenin's brazen, obdurate insistence on his way; Trotsky the master of presentation, if not negotiation ((Brest-Litovsk). But it is Stalin, who understood the importance of getting close and staying close to the center of power. It is Stalin who is left standing to take advantage of the truism: Power abhors a vacuum. Revolutions provide a multitude of vacuums that need filling. It is something of a small miracle Kotkin can track the score of times in 1918 alone Bolshevism and Lenin were nearly undone. It is during these seeming unending crises that whatever decency and humanity once propelled Bolsheviks unravels and the movement loses its soul. Ironically, he survives because an opponent like Maria Spiridonova, who had him in the palm of her hand, proves too decent to summarily execute an adversary. It is not a mistake Lenin or his most apt pupil would make. After surviving a number of near escapes Lenin makes an even more appalling deal with Imperial Germany and the die is cast. From the end of 1918 on, policy is whatever perpetuates the dictatorship. The medicine had become worse than the disease it was supposed to cure. The 'survival at any cost' strategy of Lenin explains so much about his successor, waiting in the wings. While Stalin deserves all the lavish praise that most certainly will be heaped upon it, it is not without its challenges. The dictator and the period may be Kotkin's life's passion, but it isn't mine. Occasionally it reminds one of the expression, "too much of a good thing." Yes at times my eyes glazed over at the detail and the thought of yet another Party Congress. And while Stalin's role in bringing or keeping Transcaucasia in the Soviet fold is interesting, consolidating power is never as dramatic as seizing it. But that is a small quibble and happily these moments that lag are brief. One important contribution Kotkin makes is to show conclusively it was Lenin's support and approval that put Stalin in the catbird seat. Stalin's elevation as General Secretary (among other promotions) coincided with Lenin's realization he would soon be dead. Vladimir Illych's

choice of successor if not formerly designated, was perfectly clear. The support however was not without checks: Lenin attempts to use Trotsky as a balance. Trotsky's refusal to be one of VI's chess pieces proved another colossal blunder by a man who proved again and again there is a big difference between intelligent and smart. Kotkin doubts Lenin's Testament was actually dictated by him though he acknowledges he may well have had second thoughts about his decision. He posits Lenin's wife "found" misgivings in an effort to check Stalin's increasingly unfettered power. Stalin survives the challenge brushing Trotsky aside in the process but it is here that Kotkin marks the beginnings of the legendary paranoia and mistrust that would characterize the dictator for decades. By then end of the first volume we seem to have gone 180 degrees. The idealistic autodidact has spent a lifetime "marinated in ideology", seeing threats to the Revolution (which is synonymous with himself) everywhere. The need to protect it hatches the catastrophically deadly idea of forced collectivization which results in perhaps as many as 5 million starving to death. The author has an energetic and colorful style of writing that is also the hallmark of great biography. His prose are as engaging but not as purple as Robert Caro's and like that master of narrative Kotkin beautifully manages the trick of keeping one eye on "the great men" and the other on those who are served or screwed over by their deeds. Many reviews will describe Stalin as scholarly, and with a bibliography and notes 350 pages long that is irrefutable. It is however, the very best sort. Gripping, entertaining, and informative throughout, Stalin is a marvelous achievement. A monumental man and monumental events are brought vividly to life proving once again the Faulkner adage: "the past is never dead. It's not even past." Thanks to Stephen Kotkin it isn't. 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. More history than biography By J. P. Spencer Fabulous book. More of a history of the Russian Empire and the USSR than a strict biography of Stalin, Kotkin writes entertainingly about the incredible events and their causes. Nor does he shortchange is reader on analysis for while he clearly thinks very little of Bolshevism or Stalin (he describes much of what happens after 1917 as simply criminal) he gives full voice to his characters' motivations and thoughts, at least as they expressed them in written and spoken form. Nothing I have read has so well explained the conflict with Trotsky, the split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks or the Communist hostility to the peasantry. I look forward to Volume II with great anticipation. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Stalin's beginnings By Renato Baserga This is volume 1 of Stalin's wife written by Stephen Kotkin, who is planning 2 other books on Stalin. This goes from Stalin's birthday to 1928 and his fall-out with Trotsky and the Trotskites.. Stalin, from a poor family but reading leftist literature and with a huge ambition, gained respect among the revolutionary Russians by serving time in Siberia. You could have not predicted his future from t he beginnings, very modest under Lenin, whose so-called Testament warned the other Communists of Stalin's ambitions. But Stalin made his nomination to Secretary General of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party a base for his ascendancy. Vindictiveness was a characteristic of his, but also patient working and his association with t he GPU, which gave him power to eliminate his rivals. I was never fond of Stalin, except when he was the head of the Russians in their fight against the Germans, the Great Patriotic War, as they called it. But this is to come in the forthcoming books; this one gives room to his fight against the farmers and his colleagues. Kotkin writes an English which is not the King's English, but conveys the problems that beset the Bolsheviks when they reached power in Russia (the Soviet Union). It is a good book and I recommend it..

A magnificent new biography that revolutionizes our understanding of Stalin and his world The product of a decade of intrepid research, Stalin is a landmark achievement. Stephen Kotkin offers a biography that, at long last, is equal to this shrewd, sociopathic, charismatic dictator in all his dimensions. We see a man inclined to despotism who could be utterly charming; a pragmatic ideologue; a leader who obsessed over slights yet was a precocious geostrategic thinker—unique among Bolsheviks—and yet who made egregious strategic blunders. Through it all, we see Stalin's unflinching persistence, his sheer force of will—perhaps the ultimate key to understanding his indelible mark on history. Drawing on Kotkin's exhaustive study of Soviet archival materials as well as vast scholarly literature, Stalin recasts the way we think about the Soviet Union, revolution, dictatorship, the twentieth century, and indeed the art of history itself.