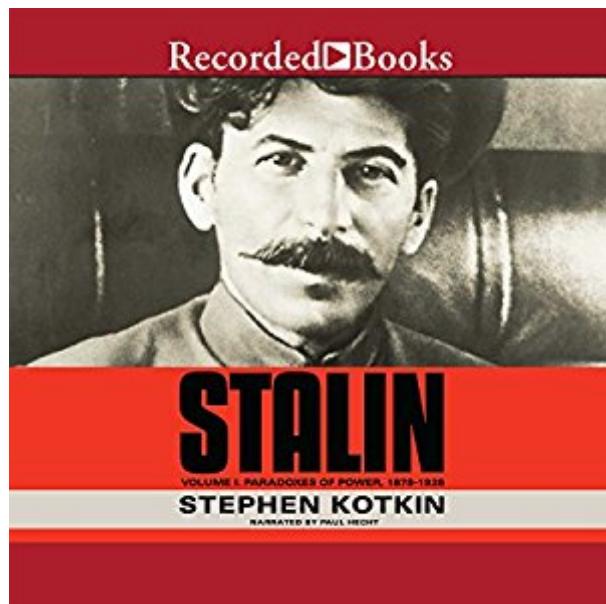


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Stalin, Volume I: Paradoxes Of Power, 1878-1928



Synopsis

A magnificent new biography that revolutionizes our understanding of Stalin and his world. It has the quality of myth: A poor cobbler's son, a seminarian from an oppressed outer province of the Russian Empire, reinvents himself as a revolutionary and finds a leadership role within a small group of marginal zealots. When the old world is unexpectedly brought down in a total war, the band seizes control of the country, and the new regime it founds as the vanguard of a new world order is ruthlessly dominated from within by the former seminarian until he stands as the absolute ruler of a vast and terrible state apparatus, with dominion over Eurasia. We think we know the story well. Remarkably, Stephen Kotkin's epic new biography shows us how much we still have to learn.

Volume One of Stalin begins and ends in January 1928 as Stalin boards a train bound for Siberia, about to embark upon the greatest gamble of his political life. He is now the ruler of the largest country in the world, but a poor and backward one, far behind the great capitalist countries in industrial and military power, encircled on all sides. In Siberia, Stalin conceives of the largest program of social reengineering ever attempted: the root-and-branch uprooting and collectivization of agriculture and industry across the entire Soviet Union. To stand up to the capitalists he will force into being an industrialized, militarized, collectivized great power is an act of will. Millions will die, and many more will suffer, but Stalin will push through to the end against all resistance and doubts. Where did such power come from? The product of a decade of scrupulous and intrepid research, Stalin contains a host of astonishing revelations. Kotkin gives an intimate first-ever view of the Bolshevik regime's inner geography, bringing to the fore materials from Soviet military intelligence and the secret police.

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Customer Reviews

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 Romanov's fell only the Bolsheviks had the courage and will to oppose Russia's 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 Bolsheviks 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 the 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.

An outstanding book, with excellent descriptions of Stalin's early life as well as detailed descriptions of the effects of Lenin's testament and death, the beginning of Stalin's autocracy, the early trials of

German engineers, and the beginning of the move toward collective farming. In a sense, the author contradicts his own thesis, since he claims that Stalin was not just a bureaucratic nonentity but gives us a lot of history in which Stalin played no other role. My feeling is that the author should shorten the book by eliminating episodes in which Stalin doesn't even appear - Russian revolutionary history has been well-covered elsewhere. And the author sometimes even wants to complete stories by explaining where people (such as White generals) went later in their lives. But the issues are minor compared to the deep insight into the basic problem of trying to apply Marxist industrial Socialism to a country that was almost all backward peasants. The approach simply didn't work, and when facts or results differed from Marxist expectations, they were simply ignored or declared to be false. Those who wanted to respond to actual situations were driven out of the party - and later policy was changed in contradiction to what had just been "proven" to be true. The author also does not ignore the incredible cruelty of all the leading revolutionaries - Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Zinoviev, Kamenev. None thought anything of having people shot immediately with no trial. In fact, one of Stalin's henchmen even suggests that he'd like to shoot a bunch of people who might cause trouble in the future ("preventive execution", one might call it). Was the United States just lucky that its early leaders (Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Franklin) neither shot their opponents nor were even interested in staying in power indefinitely? What made that difference? I really have to applaud Professor Kotkin's fine efforts here. I took my Russian history from leading historians Dietrich Gerhard and Theodore Von Laue, but found much important new material in this book that went well beyond what I knew.

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 his 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.

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