

“Stalin and Putin’s Rise”
Featuring
Stephen Kotkin
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Stephen Kotkin is a Professor of History and International Affairs at Princeton University. He has just published a magisterial book “Stalin, vol. I: Paradoxes of Power.” Despite numerous tomes already published on Stalin, Kotkin was motivated to write by the following factors:

- A trove of Soviet secret documents has recently been declassified and released for use by scholars;
- A desire to situate Stalin’s formative experiences within broader world events;
- And a methodological conviction to analyze how the act of ruling shaped Stalin’s personality (rather than how his personality explained his style of rule).

Kotkin began with one of his key takeaways - namely, that Stalin was a true Communist. Stalin and the Soviet inner circle in the 1920s genuinely believed in communism. Rather than just using it cynically to wield power, communism was the lens and lexicon they used to interpret the world.

Due to the length of Kotkin’s work, he decided to frame the bulk of his presentation around two *episodes* from the book.

First, when did Stalin become a *dictator*? In 1922 the USSR’s founder and leader Vladimir Lenin appointed Stalin the General Secretary of the Communist Party; this was understood to be the number two position. Yet later that year Lenin has a debilitating stroke and was basically out of commission for the next two years until he died. Stalin discovered that the Party controlled the State, mass media, police, and military. Such control has a transformative effect on his personality, and allowed him to build a personal dictatorship.

Second, when did Stalin become a *psychopath/sociopath*? In 1922 there were other ambitious Soviet leaders wishing to take over after Lenin. Leaders such as Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Bukharin claimed to have obtained Lenin’s last testament which advocated for removing Stalin as General Secretary. Yet despite this grave challenge to Stalin’s position, none of the other contending leaders appeared to have feared for his life. Stalin’s sociopathic tendencies did not come to the fore until 1928 with the collectivization of Soviet agriculture and the starvation of the Russian peasantry. In other words, it took six years of ruling to sculpt Stalin’s murderous behaviors.

Switching to the contemporary scene, how does Stalin's legacy compare to the current personalistic, authoritarian leader of Russia, Vladimir Putin? Putin, while both nasty and sophisticated, is a pale approximation of Stalin.

- Stalin was the consummate dictator, with perhaps only Hitler and Mao coming close.

Nonetheless, Putin's rise fits a broader pattern of Russian history. After the collapse of Tsarist Russia, the USSR under Gorbachev, and Russia under Yeltsin came periods of chaos, followed by strong personalistic rule.

- Unfortunately, this pattern has resulted in misfortune for the Russian people, as well as for neighboring countries.

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