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Book Review

"Stalin" by Stephen Kotkin

Penguin Press, $40, 949 pages

The Man of Steel

The young Stalin made a name by organizing "expropriations"—audacious robberies of banks and armored couriers—to raise the funds for the revolution.

An information card (ca. 1913) on Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili (alias Joseph Stalin) from the files of the czarist secret police. © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS

by Joshua Rubenstein

To history he will always be known as Joseph Stalin, the heir of Vladimir Lenin, the killer of Leon Trotsky, the unquestioned dictator of the Soviet Union for a quarter of a century. But he was born (in 1878) Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili in Gori, a small city in Georgia, a southern province of the Russian Empire. His father was a cobbler and by all accounts a brutish drunkard who physically abused his wife and son. Young Joseph was raised primarily by his mother, whose modest work as a washerwoman did not prevent her from providing her gifted son with the best education available to prepare him for the priesthood. Djugashvili, though, like many young people in Russia in the 1890s, especially among its repressed ethnic and national minorities, was drawn to the revolutionary movement that conspired to undermine the czarist autocracy.

Expelled from a seminary, he became involved with Lenin's Bolshevik Party, underground militants who tried to organize the empire's urban working class. Under surveillance, often arrested and at times dispatched to Siberia—from which, like many others, he was able to escape—Djugashvili distinguished himself as an agitator and propagandist. He organized "expropriations," audacious robberies of banks and armored couriers that Lenin used to fund the revolutionary movement. And in 1913, now under the name Stalin (meaning "steel" in Russian), he wrote an essay on the empire's nationalities that made his name as a theoretical thinker.

By the time the essay began to circulate, Stalin was again under arrest and on his way to Siberia. It was only with the abdication of Czar Nicholas II in February 1917 that he gained his freedom and returned to Petrograd, where both Lenin and Trotsky soon arrived from abroad. By October, Russia was in their hands.

As Stephen Kotkin makes clear in "Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928," the superb first volume of a proposed biographical trilogy, Stalin had a limited role in the revolutionary movement before 1917. He was not initially impressed by Lenin. Expecting to "see the mountain eagle of our party," he wrote at the time, "what was my disappointment when I saw the most ordinary individual, below average height, distinguished from ordinary mortals by, literally, nothing." Unlike his great rival, Leon Trotsky, Stalin was neither a close ally of Lenin nor a vicious critic. (Trotsky was to be both.) Mr. Kotkin observes that, between 1906 and 1913, Stalin had only two references to Lenin in his writings, this at a time when a resurgent autocracy was hounding revolutionaries inside the country and Lenin was the great emblem of resistance, though in exile. It was World War I and its disastrous consequences that both destroyed the Romanov dynasty and revived the potential for revolution in Russia.

The scholarly consensus has placed Stalin in a secondary role as the Bolsheviks moved against the provisional government that succeeded the czar. A contemporary chronicler of the revolution, Nikolai Sukhanov, wrote that Stalin was "a grey blur emitting a dim light." And John Reed in "Ten Days That Shook the World" (1919) did not mention Stalin at all, which explains why the book was banned for decades in the Soviet Union. Here Mr. Kotkin, a Princeton history professor, swims against the tide, claiming that Stalin "was deeply engaged in all deliberations

and actions in the innermost circle of the Bolshevik leadership" in the months ahead of the October Revolution. He does indeed make a case for Stalin's deep participation but it was still far from equaling the decisive importance of Lenin and Trotsky, who made the strategic decisions during those fateful months.

Stalin's moment came five years later, after the Bolshevik triumph in the Russian Civil War. Appointed by Lenin to be general secretary of the Communist Party, Stalin emerged "as the dominant force in the regime, second only to Lenin," Mr. Kotkin writes. With the monarchy gone and the turmoil of war and revolution, the country had broken up into contentious regions. "A single Russia had ceased to exist, replaced by a proliferation of states," Mr. Kotkin observes.

The Bolsheviks faced the monumental task of reconstituting most of the empire into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. That they managed, in such circumstances, to take control of such a vast and fragmented country was a testament to their ruthless exercise of power and the exhaustion of their myriad opponents. In sometimes daunting detail—almost a fifth of "Stalin: Paradoxes of Power" is devoted to endnotes and a bibliography—Mr. Kotkin explains how first Lenin and then Stalin imposed their will on the party and the country, fashioning a dictatorship that accepted no moral boundaries to its methods or its goals.

Mr. Kotkin goes on to explore how Stalin wrested control from his party rivals, most notably from Trotsky, Lev Kamenev, Grigory Zinoviev and Nikolai Bukharin, securing his place as the unquestioned ruler by 1928. Here, too, Mr. Kotkin takes a fresh approach, not only emphasizing Stalin's talents as a politician—in this early period, he "had to show uncommon restraint, deference, and lack of ambition not to build a personal dictatorship within the dictatorship"—but also focusing on how the struggle over power involved "skirmishes over *ideas* not solely personal power."

While Trotsky liked to dismiss Stalin as an uncultivated thug, Mr. Kotkin argues that Stalin's understanding of Marxism-Leninism won over the party and guided his broader policy objectives. At the time, Stalin was a moderate, pragmatic interpreter of Marx and Lenin, adjusting their ideas to meet the country's dire need. Trotsky, who was more radical and extreme, favored "permanent revolution," pushing for revolutionary activity internationally, as his reading of Marx required. Stalin, by contrast, fostered the idea of "socialism in one country," that is, in Russia, which should bolster itself accordingly. Unlike Trotsky, Stalin accepted Lenin's New Economic Policy of the early 1920s, which loosened controls on the economy to counter the devastation of the postwar years.

Mr. Kotkin's volume joins an impressive shelf of books on Stalin. Where does it fit? Of course, all students of Stalin rely on "Conversations With Stalin" (1962), a wonderfully written memoir by the Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas, who spent time in Moscow during and after World War II, when he was able to watch Stalin up close. Previous scholarly biographies include works by Adam Ulam (1973) and two volumes by Robert Tucker (1973 and 1990), who died before completing a proposed third. Tucker's books are especially worth reading for his attempt to plumb Stalin's psychological makeup. Both Tucker and Ulam were handicapped by a lack of access to Soviet archives.

In Moscow, Dmitri Volkogonov wrote a four-volume biography of Stalin based on materials made available after Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and the collapse of the Soviet Union; his biography appeared in English in a useful, one-volume abridged edition in 1991. Two other writers, Edvard Radzinsky in Moscow and Simon Sebag Montefiore in London, have won broad audiences for their own books on Stalin. Mr. Radzinsky's biography, published in 1996, was mostly a dramatic reworking of what Volkogonov had already written. Mr. Montefiore's two books—"Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar" (2005) and "Young Stalin" (2007)—contributed a good deal of new information about Stalin's private life but relied heavily on gossip and invented dialogue. The distinguished British historian Robert Service has written biographies of the three main Bolshevik leaders—Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky. His Stalin volume relies on copious research, but some of its claims have been questioned by other scholars. Only Mr. Kotkin's book approaches the highest standard of scholarly rigor and general-interest readability.

Mr. Kotkin relates his story with grudging respect for Stalin, a leader "who stands out in his uncanny fusion of zealous Marxist convictions and great-power sensibilities, of sociopathic tendencies and exceptional diligence and resolve." The final chapter brings us to 1928, as Stalin is about to engineer the vast social experiment of forced collectivization and accelerated industrialization. We can certainly look forward to the next volume, when Mr. Kotkin will focus on the catastrophic effects of these projects, as well as on the Great Purge and Stalin's disastrous response to the rise of Hitler in Germany. The policies that would lead to the deaths of untold millions inside the Soviet Union would soon be matched by the unspeakable bloodshed of war.

—Mr. Rubenstein is the author of
"Leon Trotsky: A Revolutionary's Life."