

The Long Read: The Writing and Re-Writing of Joseph Stalin and His Regime: A Critical Comparison of Two Biographies

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*This comparative review examines two works that use new documents to further explore Joseph Stalin's life and regime. **Stalin: New Biography of a New Dictator**, by Oleg Khlevniuk, and **Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928**, by Stephen Kotkin, have both been positioned as the ultimate biography of Stalin. Vlad Onaciu explores the different methodological approaches taken by two writers attempting to separate the myth from the reality of Stalin's regime.*

***Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*. Oleg Khlevniuk. Yale University Press. 2015.**

***Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928*. Stephen Kotkin. Allen Lane. 2014.**

Joseph Stalin was one of history's worst dictators, making him and the regime he built very interesting for both scholars and the general public. The fascination he still provokes is reflected in the impressive number of books written about him. Yet, bringing to light the crimes of the former Soviet leader has been a sinuous process. The fall of communism and the crumbling of the USSR has allowed Western scholars access, even if only temporarily, to previously secret documents that reveal many new aspects of Stalin's life and system, thus making them able to finally distinguish between myth and fact.

Oleg Khlevniuk's *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator* and Stephen Kotkin's *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* represent two of the latest attempts at offering new interpretations, both books having been hailed as Stalin's ultimate biography. Previously, others such as Robert Conquest (*Stalin: Destroyer of Nations*), Simon Sebag Montefiore (*Young Stalin and The Court of the Red Tsar*), Dmitri Volkogonov (*Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*), Adam Ulam (*Stalin: The Man and His Era*) and Robert C. Tucker (*Stalin as Revolutionary* and *Stalin in Power*) have all tried to further clarify the motivations behind the Great Terror and other crimes. The last two are particularly noteworthy, for, as Khlevniuk aptly puts it, they offered highly pertinent interpretations at a time when access to archival sources was impossible.



For those familiar with the historical study of the Soviet Union, both Kotkin and Khlevniuk are very well-known, having made important contributions in areas such as society, economy and politics. Kotkin is the author of the ground-breaking *Magnetic Mountain* (1995), which served to create a new interpretational paradigm by moving focus from the sociological approach to understanding the individual strategies and modes of adaptation to the rules of the Stalinist Era. Khlevniuk has conversely focused most of his research on analysis of the Red Tsar's inner circle, thus making him one of the foremost experts on the Soviet elite and the functioning of its political system (see also *Master of the House: Stalin and his Inner Circle* and *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle*). His biography of the dictator is therefore obligatory reading.

The narrative style of each author is the perfect window not only into their interpretations, but also into their respective approaches to history. Khlevniuk chose to rely heavily on a story placed on two temporal levels, with the

present being the hours before Stalin's death and his past life reconstructed through flashbacks. This constitutes an original instrument through which to immerse readers in the narrative. However, the approach remains linear in respecting chronological order, therefore making the book accessible for non-specialist readers as well. Kotkin, on the other hand, takes a more traditional approach to his work in choosing the strictly chronological method of telling the story, although he offers a broader interpretation of the past.

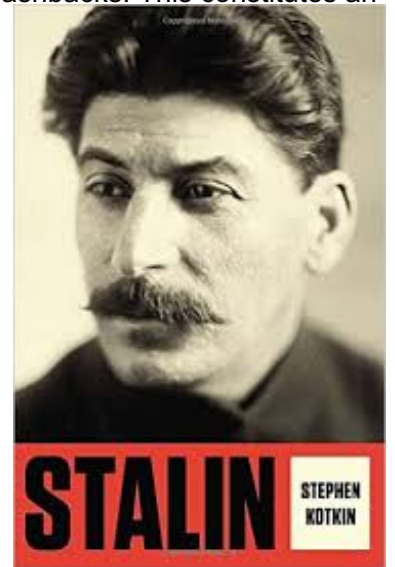


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Placing a figure of Stalin's size outside its own mythology and within grand history is anything but an easy feat. Khlevniuk, while not ignoring the broader context of historical events, focuses more on Stalin the individual and his development into the infamous Red Tsar, with the fate of the Russian Empire playing out in the background. While he undertakes a marvellous psychological analysis of Stalin's childhood, a not-so-common approach in existing historical research, he overemphasises Stalin's culpability, which tends to give the impression that the author is playing the role of judge. This probably stems from his determination to counter the new wave of Stalinist apologists. While he does not straightforwardly mention individuals by their name, it is quite obvious that this is a reference to the Putin regime's tendency towards restoring Stalin's image. On the other hand, Kotkin is somewhat more ambitious as he not only aims to illustrate and explain Stalin's development as a young revolutionary, but also to merge this individualised account with grand history: a difficult balance to attain. This makes his book not only a biography, but also one of the best works on modern Russia, moving from the decline and fall of the Tsarist Empire to the rise of the Soviet Union.

How historians choose to treat their sources is crucial. Both authors have used archives as the core of their research, and stress their importance for understanding Stalin's complex system of relationships and power. Yet there is a difference, as Khlevniuk states from the very beginning that he uses only the most reliable sources, and that it is on these that he builds his entire analysis. On the other hand, Kotkin shows more openness to using a more diverse set of sources. This does not mean Khlevniuk chooses to ignore these entirely, but that memoirs and diaries are renowned for their subjectivity, which he considers a hindrance in properly understanding and explaining Stalin's life. Of course, this does not stop him from praising Montefiore's efforts, which relied heavily on the statements of former Soviet elites. Kotkin presents a mix between the two, and this might stem from two reasons: firstly, his past research has been an attempt at merging the revisionist approach with attention upon the individual. Secondly, this is but the first volume of a trilogy, allowing him to expand on as many issues as he sees necessary. Khlevniuk's biography is more condensed, as he himself admits there was a need to select which aspects he was going to write about, and which to leave out.

Stalin's relationship to the leading circle has been a central point of academic debate. Khlevniuk insists on the Soviet dictator's influence and control over these individuals, arguing that they had far less power than previously thought. The idea of Stalin dividing the members of the Politburo, and even turning them against each other, is widely spread among scholars, and rightfully so, but Khlevniuk's overemphasis on Stalin's guilt might reduce that which is also attributable to members of the Politburo; after all, Lavrentiy Beria is perceived by many to have been the architect of the Gulag system, and Lazar Kaganovich as having an important role in the Holodomor, the famine of 1932-33 in Ukraine, which, according to both Norman Naimark and Timothy Snyder, can be seen as an attempt at crushing any remaining national tendencies (see *Stalin's Genocides* and *Bloodlands* respectively). Then again, Khlevniuk harshly criticises the memoirs of the former Soviet elite in remaining silent on issues of mass repression, as if to hide their own involvement. Thus it would not be possible to argue that he does not take into account their contributions to the sufferings of the Great Terror.

What both authors insist upon is Stalin's successful bid for power and his relationship with Lenin and other early Bolshevik leaders. They agree that his political abilities were no secret, and that all party members knew what he was capable of achieving. Where they diverge is with regards to Lenin's perception of, and plans for, Stalin. While Khlevniuk argues that by 1922 this relationship had ceased to be a harmonious one, Kotkin believes that Lenin's actions prove otherwise in that he kept promoting Stalin through the hierarchy, and that Trotsky lacked any real popularity as he had a mainly condescending attitude and was often in conflict with his Bolshevik comrades. Furthermore, Kotkin tackles the famed 'Secret Testament', supposedly dictated by Lenin on his deathbed, in which he warned against allowing Stalin to become the new leader and named Trotsky as his successor, which Kotkin holds to be nothing more than a forgery meant to put pressure on the Soviet dictator. What both authors agree upon is Stalin's continuous division of his enemies and allies, either by limiting their access to information or by the manipulation of their interests and vanity.

Nearing the end of our critical reading of these two biographies, we must ponder on the significance of interpretation in historical research as it greatly influences how various sources are used. Both Khlevniuk and Kotkin have used archives, and while their conclusions and main assertions have mostly coincided, the overall approach and even their aims differ. There is no saying as to which is the best biography; rather, we should perceive them as complementary works constructing a comprehensive image of Stalin and his regime.

Vlad Onaciu is currently a second-year PhD student in the Faculty of History and Philosophy at 'Babes-Bolyai' University where he previously finished his BA and MA in contemporary history. His doctoral research focuses on issues regarding the lives of workers in factories during the communist regime in Romania. His academic interests include the history of communism, oral history, international relations (mainly civilisational studies) and 19th and 20th Century history in general. [Read more reviews by Vlad Onaciu.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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