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Review: The Turn to Tyranny

We may never know what degree of personal obsession, political calculation and ideological zeal drove Stalin to kill and persecute so many. Joshua Rubenstein reviews 'Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941' by Stephen Kotkin.



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By *Joshua Rubenstein*

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In the aftermath of Lenin's death in January 1924, Joseph Stalin — already secretary-general of the Communist Party—emerged as the outright leader of the Soviet Union. “Right through 1927,” Stephen Kotkin notes, Stalin “had not appeared to be a sociopath in the eyes of those who worked most closely with him.” But by 1929-30, he “was exhibiting an intense dark side.” Mr. Kotkin’s “Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941,” the second volume of a planned three-volume biography, tracks the Soviet leader’s transformation during these crucial years. “Impatient with dictatorship,” Mr. Kotkin says, Stalin set out to forge “a despotism in mass bloodshed.”

The three central episodes of Mr. Kotkin’s narrative, all from the 1930s, are indeed violent and catastrophic, if in different ways: the forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture; the atrocities of the Great Terror, when Stalin “arrested and murdered immense numbers of loyal people”; and the rise of Adolf Hitler, the man who would become Stalin’s ally and then, as Mr. Kotkin puts it, his “principal nemesis.” In each case, as Mr. Kotkin shows, Stalin’s personal character—a

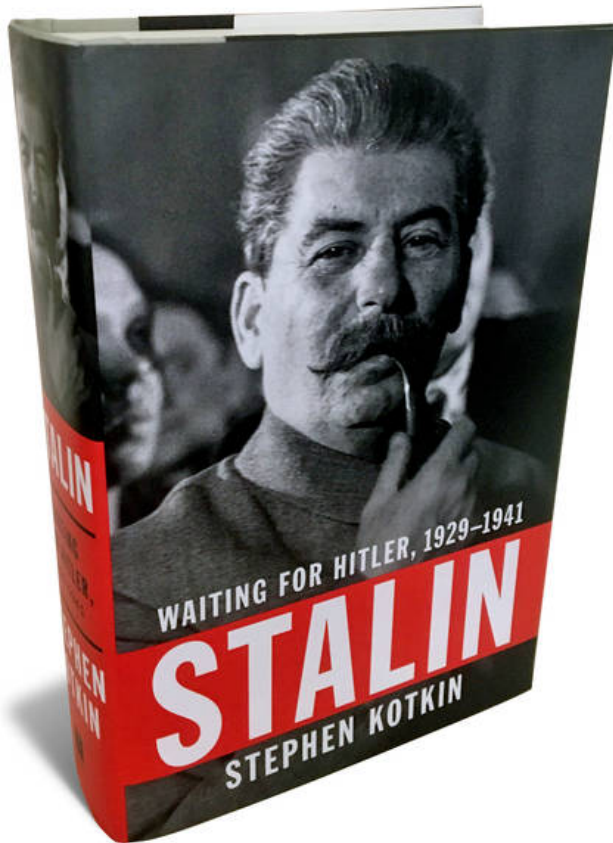
combination of ruthlessness and paranoia—played a key role in the unfolding of events.

Forced collectivization was the linchpin of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan. With the peasants living mostly on small-scale plots, he compelled millions of households to move onto collective farms and sought to turn many peasants into the industrial workers who would build the factories and electric stations needed for crash industrialization. To enforce his plan, he set draconian quotas for the confiscation of "surplus" food and violently repressed millions of so-called kulaks (supposedly better-off peasants), whom he wanted to exterminate as a class.

The consequent famine killed more than five million people in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Russia's North Caucasus region. Scholars continue to debate whether the famine in Ukraine, which killed some 3.5 million, was a deliberate aim of Stalin's policies—intended to destroy Ukraine's national spirit and culture—or the unforeseen result of his war on the peasantry. Although Mr. Kotkin argues that the famine was "not intentional," his book makes it clear that Stalin was well aware of widespread starvation and that he responded with remarkable cruelty, sealing Ukraine's borders to make escape impossible. The Kremlin allowed the famine to deepen, accepting a high number of victims rather than ameliorate its most calamitous effects.

PHOTO: WSJ

Another
crisis
erupted
after the



STALIN: WAITING FOR HITLER, 1929-1941

By Stephen Kotkin

Penguin Press, 1,154 pages, \$40

assassination of the Leningrad party chief Sergei Kirov in December 1934. Although many historians, including Robert Conquest and Amy

Knight, have argued that Stalin almost certainly orchestrated the crime, Mr. Kotkin accepts the current scholarly consensus that Stalin was not behind Kirov's murder and that Leonid Nikolayev, a disaffected young worker, carried it out on his own.

There is no debate, however, over how Stalin exploited the murder. He had always insisted that the country "was honeycombed with wreckers," as Mr. Kotkin writes, and beset by conspiracies to subvert Bolshevik rule. In the wake of Kirov's death, Stalin first accused thousands of Communist Party figures of engaging in a conspiracy to kill Kirov and then expanded the purge to encompass tens of thousands of military commanders, state-security personnel and party officials, including leaders of the revolution like Nikolai Bukharin, Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev. Mr. Kotkin argues that Stalin carried out the purge to "smash his inner circle" and avenge elements within the party that had opposed collectivization, but he

doesn't provide sufficient documentation to buttress the claim. Stalin probably regarded army and state-security officers as the only force that could dislodge him.

With the purges under way, Stalin embarked on the Great Terror, a wave of violence that killed more than 800,000 people in the space of 16 months. Among those targeted were the members of ethnic groups—Poles, Koreans, Germans—whom Stalin regarded as unreliable elements, a fifth column that could threaten the regime in case of war. As with all great crimes, we may never truly know what degree of personal obsession, political calculation and ideological fanaticism drove Stalin to order the execution and imprisonment of so many.

While Mr. Kotkin discusses foreign-policy developments throughout the book, including the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States in 1933 and Soviet intervention in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the final chapters of "Waiting for Hitler" focus on the 1939 Non-Aggression Pact with Nazi Germany. Within days of its signing, the Wehrmacht invaded Poland from the west, and the Red Army soon occupied Poland from the east. It was the pact that created a common border between Germany and the Soviet Union, a miscalculation by Stalin that proved to be nearly fatal to his regime.

For the next two years, while cooperating with Germany, Stalin tried in vain to fathom Hitler's intentions. Mr. Kotkin provides a nearly day-by-day account of diplomatic maneuvers involving the Soviet Union, Germany, England and France, along with urgent intelligence reports sent to the Kremlin beginning in August 1940 arguing that Hitler was planning an attack on the Soviet Union. It is here that Stalin's paranoia proved momentously damaging. No Moscow intelligence chief, aware that several of his predecessors had been executed, would dare contradict Stalin when he insisted that Hitler could be trusted. The reckoning came on June 22, 1941: Stalin's disregard of the warnings left his country unprepared for the German attack, the point at which Mr. Kotkin's third volume will presumably begin.

There have been many other biographies of Stalin, but none matches the range of information and analysis that animates Mr. Kotkin's ambitious project. "Waiting for Hitler" is biography and history on a grand scale—equal in scope to the enormity of the events it describes.

Mr. Rubenstein is the author of “The Last Days of Stalin.”

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