

Stephen Kotkin: "Stalin, Volume I: Paradoxes of Power"

Book Discussion

First Thesis.

(7:18) The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 was *the* great tragedy of the Left. There had been a parliamentary social democratic Left, in Europe, with smaller versions of it outside Europe. The biggest party in the German Reichstag were the German Social Democrats. There were debates among the German Social Democrats about whether parliamentarism was the way to get to socialism, or.. You needed somehow to have a seizure of power, a real revolution, a violent upheaval. Nonetheless, they were in the **Sconsted** Parliament. They were involved. And they were *by far* the strongest version of the Left in existence on the planet then.

Bolshevism was not a parliamentary road. It had no tolerance whatsoever for what it called bourgeois democracy. There were no real debates inside the Russian version as opposed to the German version, about whether you could get to socialism in a peaceful, democratic parliamentary way. It was revolution or bust. And this revolution meant a dictatorship, they were very clear about this. Unfortunately, large numbers of people who became professionals writing about this, and identified with a Leftist Revolution have confused the story, and made the Bolsheviks out to be *kind-of-sort-of-almost-maybe* social democrats, but this is a *big mistake* and Lenin, *if he were in this room today, obviously if Lenin were alive today, he would have a talk show on MSNBC. So, we have to use our imagination.* Imagine he was in this room today. And some historian tried to get up and explain that "Really Lenin was a kind of social democrat!", and really he was sort of for pluralism, and Lenin would just scream bloody murder and expel that person from the room, *which is what he did at the time.*

So, it's very important to know this because the bifurcation of the Left, and the victory of the Hard Left, of the Dictatorial Left, of the Bolshevik Left, had tremendous consequences and still does because it helped **galvanize** the right and **radicalize** the right which felt that it needed to do whatever was necessary to **stave off** Bolshevism. It also as I said, discredited the Left because Lenin and the **expropriated** all the symbols of the Left. And the German Social Democrats lost out in the global struggle for primacy of the Left. Over time, many many Leftists

came to understand that Bolshevism was their *enemy*, not their friend, the common turn, the fights, the attempt to build a popular front in the 1930s, all of which failed and it failed because social democrats and the communists (the Bolsheviks), and the Soviet Union hated each other and stabbed each other in the back. There was a popular front on the right. This was Franco. It was successful, for good or for bad. *I'm not arguing that this is a good thing or a bad thing. I'm just laying out the first thesis. So, I think this is one of the main arguments of the book and it has so far gone unremarked in the few hundred reviews that have been written.*

Second Thesis

The second thesis that I'd like to present tonight. No nostalgia for Tsarist Russia (Russian Empire). The Tsarist **autocracy** was doomed. It could not manage the modernity that it was up against. It was doomed not only in terms of evolving into something better, it was bad at authoritarianism. It refused, for example, to allow street mobilization on its behalf. Hundreds of thousands of people on the Far Right wanted to take to the streets and defend the Tsarist autocracy, and the autocracy said no because it had an archaic understanding of power, which was that the autocrat didn't need popular mobilization. As a result of which, the autocracy sabotaged not just the country but itself. And those people who find an evolutionary process in Tsarist Russia and look for example to groups in society or look to the belated parliament (or Duma 1905, 06, *right?*). They see the sprouts of a possible alternative to Tsarism but the autocracy didn't allow even mobilization on its own behalf, let alone tolerate a genuine political system. *So the second thesis I'd like to present, a major argument in the book, is Tsarist Russia as a political system was doomed.* Once again, that's unremarked for the most part in the reviews.

Third Thesis

The third point I'd like to, the third thesis I'd like to bring up. *So, once again, I've never given the talk this way before and I'm trying this out and I don't know if it's working but I'm gonna go like this for a while and then we'll see if that's okay.* The third thesis I argue in the book is that modernization is not a natural process. You don't move from traditional to modern society, right? In some sociological way. Modernism or modernity is about geopolitics. It works this way: *somebody shows up at your door, uninvited. You didn't want the British to show up. You didn't want whoever it might be, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese to show up but they come and*

low and behold, they have really big boats and they have tanks and artillery and airplanes and they have engineers and universities and trained officers and trained civil servants and they have mass parties that incorporate the lower orders and they have a national debt and they have a tax system and it turns out that they're doing all these amazing things, this package of modern or modernity attributes And they come and they tell you that now uninvited they're gonna "rule you" or "take your stuff away" and you don't have much of a choice. You can't say, "You know, I didn't really invite you, the British. It's kind of you to come here and tell us how to live here with your tanks and everything else, but we don't need you. You can go home now," right? That rarely worked. Usually, when they showed up uninvited, you had the choice of becoming a colony either semi-colonial or full colonial rule, OR developing the attributes of modernity to fight off the uninvited guests, who had these attributes. Only Japan of all great powers outside the club made it into the club by developing these modern attributes and being able to compete in the international system in the decades around the time when Stalin was born and thereafter.

And so the same challenge for Russia applies to everybody else. Acquire the attributes of modernity or fall prey to the unsentimental brutal international system. And this is what the Tsarist regime *failed* at, and it's what the Soviet regime *succeeded* at, for a time, but then the attributes of modernity shifted and the Soviet attributes didn't shift and they became out of sync. They were no longer modern and they experienced that collapse that most of us lived through. So, *that would be my third thesis.*

Fourth Thesis

My fourth thesis is that Bolshevism was not inevitable in Tsarist Russia. It took a lot of doing as I try to show in the book. A lot of work by various different people. Some of it unintentional or some of it they didn't intend what they were doing and the outcome came that way. There were structural factors but Bolshevism was not inevitable- somebody had to do Bolshevism and Lenin comes out to be the singular figure that we all thought him to be. He was the one that drove this radical process but the country moved through the radicalism as a whole, towards Lenin's position, obviously because of the war, World War I. The entire Russian Revolution takes place during World War I.

Once again, this doesn't make Bolshevism inevitable. There were many mistakes by various different opponents, socialists on the Left, etc.

Fifth Thesis

Bolshevism wasn't inevitable, it was an achievement, In a perverse way in my argument. Some form of socialism was very likely. The one democratic election they had in 1918 it turned out, 1917-18, to be a vote for the Constituent Assembly. Which happened after the Bolshevik seizure of power mostly in December 1917, convened in January 1918. 80% of the votes cast, were cast for the Left. Some socialist parties have won. The socialist parties are very different. Some are Democratic-leaning, many are Dictatorial-leaning, some are Ukrainian Nationalists, etc. So, the Socialism is not monolithic but the drift towards the Left is very very clear. It would have been hard for the Right to take power in the chaos of Russia set in 1917-18-19. However, that's what happened in every other country. In all other places where there was a Leftist revolution during or as a result of World War I, the forces of order, the Right, crushed the Leftist revolution. *This happened in Bavaria, this happened in Hungary, this happened in Northern Italy,* it *didn't* happen in the Soviet Union. So, what's to be explained in the Soviet Union is not some inevitability of Bolshevism but the *endurance of Bolshevism. The endurance of it.* How come in this one place, the left ceases power and the chaos but holds on to power? And so then the 50s, *as I'd like to then unfold,* is that it's because they built a state. They built a state *not any kind of state but a specific kind of state and I go through in great detail about how they built the state and what was the nature of the state* because institutions are very important. Sometimes institutions arise from intentions. Sometimes they come from unintended consequences.

Sixth Thesis

I'll give you one example of this institutional paradox. The new regime inherited the old regime's civil servants, teachers, and officers, right? They needed their expertise. They needed, for example, someone who could teach mathematics or could teach Russian language.

They needed someone who understood finance. They needed someone who understood tactics in a field battle and so they incorporated these people into the revolution but they didn't trust them because they had taken an oath to serve the Tsar, and the oath to serve the Tsar meant that their loyalties was suspect to the revolutionaries and so they introduced what was called the political commissar. Not just in the army, next to the Tsarist officer, but also in the school system, in the bureaucracy, everywhere that expertise was needed, they introduced someone to watch over the political correctness of that expertise, to watch over the loyalty. And so you get a party state, a dualist party state, and inside the bureaucracy, let's take the ministry

of finance which is called *in the inner work period*, the commissary of finance. *Later, the Ministry of Finance*. The commissary of finance has a meeting and they're all experts and they meet about finance and then the commissars or the party cell inside the commissary has another meeting. And it's not the same people because the party people don't have the expertise. The reds and the experts are separate and they're watching over the experts and there are these two meetings. Over time in the Soviet Union, the Reds and the experts become one. Everyone's educated in Soviet schools. Everyone belongs to the Communist Party in order to make it into the Ministry of Finance. So, the Reds and the experts are one but the two meeting problem, the duality, the redundancy goes on all the way through. And so they're still having the two meetings and it's the exact same people at the two different meetings.

First, the meeting is the finance people and then the meeting is the party cell. If you go to Russia today to do research, you go to Ukraine, you go to Kazakhstan, there are two different archives. The party archive and the state archive. It's the same business for the most part except for the heresy hunting that's in the party archive.

Did they intend to create a redundant doula state from the beginning? No, it arose during the revolutionary process because they're incorporating the civil servants from the old regime and wondering if they're gonna undermine them, have a conspiracy, take them down. and so they introduce this model of duality party state throughout.

So, once again, not all institutions arise from the intentions but institutions then have a dynamic that sometimes goes beyond their original usage. So, that's another big part of the book. I could go on in this vein. There are arguments about the nationalities, the various different ways in which Bolshevism understood or didn't understand the kind of ethnic or national grid that they built the state in, and how they incorporated various different non-Russian peoples across this Soviet Eurasia. That's also a thesis and argument and the book and the basic answer is that World War I created facts on the ground and the Bolsheviks didn't have the ability to undo the Ukrainian state that had broken off from the Tsarist Empire, right? Finland, Poland, the pieces of the Tsarist Empire that broke off as a result of World War I, the dissolution of Tsarist Empire, were facts on the ground and even when they were able to reconquer with the Red Army, it wasn't clear that they could completely snuff out the existence of Georgia, the existence of Azerbaijan, all of which they didn't do themselves. With few exceptions, these things existed before the Bolsheviks tried to grapple with them. And so they tried to turn this grid to their advantage and create the union of Soviet Socialist Republics turning the nations there. *So, that's another would be the sixth point and I could keep going now along these veins of state building and institutions but...*

Seventh Thesis

I now wanna turn to historical agency and personality, the seventh point. So, the seventh thesis that I'd like to put down for you is that *not* Stalin's personality gives you the politics and the ideas. It's the *politics and the ideas* that give you Stalin's personality. I have shifted or tried to shift from a personal story, from a story about a sociopath or psychopath, murderous tyrant, *by the way, all of which he was, eventually*, to a story of politics and ideas and through the politics and ideas, you see him becoming this sociopath. Because as it turns out if you look in real-time at the documentation, not retrospective documentation not 30-40 years after the fact if somebody survived, got into the

immigration, and then said "You know when we were on the schoolyard and he said "oh I'm gonna get all you guys!" I knew he was gonna murder us all and collectivize the peasantry", right? "I knew when he put the cat in the microwave that we were all in big trouble", right? That kind of retrospective 30-40 years later reminiscing about things that some of those things might have happened. *I'm not disputing that some of those stories are true. But I'm just saying that I don't really try to use those anecdotes. I try to go in real-time* to see when those who are around him, who worked with him closely, who knew him on a day-to-day basis. When, if ever, they began to be afraid of him, when they began to think he was exhibiting sociopathic behavior, and as I try to show in the book, this is not really visible to them until 1927-28.

There is the Stalin that you would recognize and the one that is correctly depicted in the books previous to mine. As the murderous tyrant, is not visible to his closest comrades. Most of whom he will kill. It's not visible to them until 1927-28 and then they begin to worry a little bit about he's a little, he's not what they thought. Still, they haven't figured it out and some of them take even longer to figure it out but you begin to see this conversation in 1927, but in 1922 and 1923 and 1924, and 1925, there is no contemporary evidence to show that he is fighting all of these demons and ready to murder people. The way he gratuitously does in the 1930s and beyond. So, I think that's a very important point to put the politics and the ideas there because that's what he's grappling with, *and here's gonna be a point number eight*.

Eighth Thesis

He's grappling with the geopolitics. But not as a Tsarist statesman, *as a revolutionary, as a communist, as a communist statesman*. The single most important state discovery in my view of the secret archives, *the communist era secret archives which are now more accessible than*

ever and believe it or not increasingly so. Stuff that keeps coming out every year that I get my hands on like other researchers. The single biggest discovery of those archives is that behind closed doors, they talk the same way. As they did in their propaganda. Exactly the same way. You know, many of us thought or some of us thought at least that we would get into the secret archives and we finally start to see. "you know, all that crap about the all that nonsense about class warfare, all that stuff about imperialism, we can relax now. You know, we're not live, we're not on camera, we're not in the public," but it turns out behind closed doors, that's all they talk about when they're secretly among themselves and don't expect anybody to find out what they're talking about.

It turns out that the communists *were* communists!

That's the big discovery of the archives and it turns out that Stalin himself was a true-believing communist. He was a man of ideas. You know, he was successful in school. He was one of the best pupils, in the elementary school, teacher's pet, right? sung in the choir, got into the seminary in Teflice, *the capital of the caucuses, capital of Georgia in the caucuses*. The Tsar's regime did not allow a university in the caucuses. It was afraid of the students. How you could be modern and compete against Germany and Britain and other countries and you wouldn't allow a university, right? This was, why I say, the Tsarist autocracy was doomed.

The highest level of education in the caucuses were the Gymnasium and the seminary and he made it into the seminar and he was the top of his class for several years. Once again, teacher's pet, *teacher's pet means that he's the one that the teacher gets to snitch on the other students*. If you know from your own experience. Those of us in this room who've been teacher's pets know what it means to be a teacher's pet.

And so he was very successful and he could look forward to either getting a job as a priest which was his original ambition, a school teacher, or even making it into a university elsewhere outside the caucuses where most of the caucuses born educated people who did go to university. Many of his contemporaries made it. They went to university in Zarys, Poland. They went to University in Zarst, Lithuania, and other places, right?

So, he could have followed that path but instead, he gave all that up for a life of the underground. A revolutionary life. He had no money, no job, and for 20 years *about*, he was hounded by the police living in the underground. Siberian exile, escape, back to Siberian exile. It got to the point where they sent him to a place where you couldn't even escape from. So that's the life he chose and he remained with because he was fighting for social justice. He believed that the Tsarist regime was unjust. And that he dedicated his life to bringing justice about in his eyes through a Marxist revolution, right?

And so he's a man of ideas from an early age and if you read Stalin's works, you read his, you don't read Trotsky's summary and condemnation of Stalin's works. You don't read socialism in one country through Trotsky's reading of it. You just go back and read the actual text, You can see that while Stalin is not the Montescue or the Pascal, nonetheless, within the revolutionary Milia, within the Bolshevik milia, within Russian revolutionary politics he is a man of ideas no question. By the way, Trotsky didn't really write very much he dictated most of the things he was a brilliant speaker he was a brilliant orator he could speak in a way that Stalin never learned how to speak Stalin had his vocal cords are very weak he had a condition and before microphones they couldn't even hear him in the hall at the tenth party congress in 1921 in a hall about ten times the size Stalin was at the podium and almost no one except the first few rows could hear what he was saying. Trotsky, however, had a booming voice and was a brilliant orator but in terms of writing and communicating the message to the masses, the party faithful, whatever. One of the things I try to show in the book is that Stalin was not a lump in intellectual but something of a real intellectual in the time period in the context that we're talking about.

Ninth Thesis

Alright, final thesis, I think this is the tenth although maybe I lost uh count there. I think we're good on time actually. I think we're totally okay. You gotta take a little bit of a stretch here sometimes. You know, this is about as far as undergraduates can go. So, I'm used to at this point stretching. Obviously, this is a different kind of audience and obviously many undergraduates can do the full 50 minutes and it's the professors who go to sleep during the lecture. So, we don't wanna cast dispersions on any one particular group. You know the one about Moses when he appears in Washington DC. You don't know this one? George Bush who's president sees Moses on the street in Washington and yells, "Hey, Moses, hey, Moses". And Moses looks at Bush and runs the other way. And escapes. Bush, that's a little bit weird. The next day, the same thing happens. Bush on the street, there's Moses, sees him again, he goes, "Hey, Moses!" and Moses takes like a rocket. Bush, however, was a bit of an athlete and Bush runs and catches Moses. Catches him and says, "Moses, what's the problem? You know, I'm uh uh a true believer uh I go to church and the chance to meet you is one of the most amazing things in my life" and Moses looks at him and says, "you know, the last time I spoke to a bush, 40 years in the desert."

The Moses Bush joke is one that doesn't skirt the line and some it's I have other jokes that relate to the subject matter but you start making fun of genocide and it can get uncomfortable. Unless you're on cable. In which case, it's okay. Especially if it's late at night.

Let me then conclude uh with this geopolitical story. So, we have a true believer who's wrestling with Russian power in the world.

He's trying to revive Russian power but in a communist fashion. He's not a Tsarist statesman. He is a communist, a true believer. This doesn't mean that doctrine dogma determines everything he does because one of the things he learns from Lenin is tactical flexibility. One of Lenin's core beliefs was that anything was possible and even necessary to get to where eventually he wanted them to go. So, you could violate all your dogma, violate all your principles in order to enact those principles and **dogma** eventually. Total tactical flexibility and Stalin learned this at Lenin because Lenin was an awesome tactician in many ways. Trotsky lacked the same kind of tactical flexibility that Stalin developed. Trotsky was never really as close to Lenin as we think compared to Stalin and Stalin was not ashamed to go to school and be Lenin's pupil in reality. Whereas Trotsky tried to see himself as Lenin's equal or actually better. And anyway, so Dogma doesn't determine everything, and dealing with the geopolitics was very hard. The core geopolitical bedrock of Russia in the last several centuries has been the following and we see it even today. It's not going away. The argument is that because they have no natural borders, right? Russia has no natural borders. It doesn't have the Atlantic, the Pacific, Mexico, and Canada. It has a different geography and therefore, in order to defend its own security, it has to expand so that the peripheral areas, the areas around it aren't used by Russia's enemies, the other great powers to undermine Russian power. And so, therefore, Russia is aggressive to the West but defensive to itself. It is taking over neighboring territories because it needs to defend itself that has no natural borders and if it doesn't do that, then, those territories become instruments in the hands of Russia's enemies. Platforms for invasion, platforms for subversion, platforms for dismemberment. You'll remember Not that long ago, today's President Putin of Russia, we're not putting him on the same plane with Stalin. There's no comparison between them in that regard but in one way, there is a comparison. He said that Ukraine is not a state.

Now, obviously, Ukraine is a state. You can go there. They have a separate language. They have 48 million people.

There's an ethnicity, Ukrainian ethnicity. There's no question that Ukraine is a state but what did he mean? He wasn't lying. He was speaking a point of view that he holds. He was

saying that Ukrainian state sovereignty doesn't exist. That Ukraine is not a sovereign state in the international system because small states' sovereignty is not real.

They're only instruments in the hands of larger states. They're play-things in the hands of the great powers and so, if he doesn't control Ukraine, the Western powers will control Ukraine and they will use it to further their interests and in fact, to subvert Russia and maybe even not just contain but dismember Russia. Just like the Soviet Union was dissolved, right? Just like the Tsarist Empire was dissolved. So, this core bedrock factor in Russian geopolitics Predate Stalin.

And it postulates him about this no-natural borders problem and dealing with Russian security by expanding to take over peripheral areas to deny them as bases as instruments for other powers, right? Now, obviously, there's a limit to how far this can go. Stalin actually got all the way to Berlin. Alexander for a while got all the way to Paris as Stalin used to remind his minions when they were in private, right? Nonetheless, German power was not gonna be eradicated and incorporated by Russian power, and in the east, there was Japan and China and that was also a barrier.

But up into those barriers, Russia sees those smaller states in between, even a state as big as Ukraine, as lacking real sovereignty. They can't decide themselves even if they want to be neutral. They're gonna become playthings. This was Stalin's core thinking but refracted through the communist idea whereby not only did they have to be somehow colonized or incorporated by the Soviet Union but also a clone regime.

A communist regime was in many ways or some loyal regime which was partly communist as he figured out through the experience of Mongolia which was the first Soviet satellite and it is also a major story in the book. So just to conclude then, we have a story of the difficulty of managing Russian power in the world. Predating Stalin and so the book actually doesn't go into Stalin's childhood as the key to opening it up. The book opens up with the Bismarck's unification of Germany. Why would Bismarck's unification of Germany open a biography of Stalin? And the answer is because Bismarck's unification of Germany was a critical eruption in global history. Changed the lay of the land, a new power, a dynamic power on the continent. Which was more important than the birth of Stalin the same decade, the 1870s.

Also, the Meiji Restoration in Japan happened at the same time. Japan was already a consolidated country but it was not a modern dynamic country in the same way. Germany was not a single country before Bismarck as you know. So, you get the rise of Germany, the rise of Japan. These are the big stories in the 1870s and these are the stories that Russian power has to deal with because it's flanking either side of the Russian Empire. It's a whole new bull game.

They lose a war with Japan in 1904-05 as you know. They lose the war with Germany in 1914-18.

The Germans win on the eastern front. People forget this. The treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 is a German victory.

The Germans lose the war on the western front. And as a result of which the Eastern Front Treaty is annul. But the Germans have beaten the Russians in World War I. And so these are the things that Stalin's gonna try to manage and you see him dealing with the difficulty of the dissolution whereby Finland broke off, Poland broke off, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia broke off, and these things are now outside his control and they wanna have their own foreign policy but he sees them as these instruments, these playthings in the hands of Britain, France, Germany, or whatever capitalist, imperialist power. He's worried about and remember, behind closed doors, that's all they talk about. Capitalism, imperialism, the bourgeoisie, finance capital. He's talking about Hitler's regime. He's talking about finance capital in the Orthodox Marxist understanding.

So, Stalin looks like he will solve this problem in time, Right? Because they're gonna beat Germany in that war and then they're gonna beat Japan entering late in the war in World War II. Alright, they entered that in 1945 and Stalin's gonna have in many ways been part of the the major part of the defeat of German power and a part of the defeat of Japanese power most of which is done by the US obviously in the Pacific and he's gonna then look like he's won. He solved this geopolitical problem for Russian power in the world.

But of course, he wins the war but he loses the peace. And it takes you know half a century to see him lose the peace. *And the reasons why he loses the peace. That's volume three which I haven't written yet.*

But him grappling with all of this. That's where volume one is and showing him developing a geopolitics for the Soviet state. That's his principal achievement. He's then gonna collectivize the peasants as I said where the book ends in January 1928. He travels to Siberia and in a room this size, he announces to a small group that he's gonna collectivize agriculture forcefully. It's a very dramatic moment and then he goes back to Moscow and enforces this decision against everyone's opposition because he's created a dictatorship.

In the meantime, he's unbelievably skilled at dictatorial politics it turns out and he's not there by accident and he creates the dictatorship in a way that is awesome. Not in a moral sense, not in a value sense, but in terms of if you're interested in power, no one accumulated or exercised more power than Stalin did and so watching him build this thing is breathtaking.

Although you kinda know the ends with which he's gonna use it for. So *anyway*, so *if that's if I think we're good, that's uh, like I said, I don't know if that worked but I tried a new thing tonight with presenting the book. Thank you.*