

# A review of Stephen Kotkin's *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928*

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In November 2014, Penguin Press released the first volume of a projected three-volume biography, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928*, by Princeton University professor Stephen Kotkin. Many initial reviews have heaped praise on this deeply flawed work. It was even a finalist this year for the Pulitzer Prize for biography. Far from contributing to an understanding of the first 50 years of Stalin's life, however, Kotkin has produced a bloated and poorly written work, recycling many of the anti-communist or Stalinist lies of the Cold War, and adding some of his own. He has thereby contributed to ongoing attempts since 1991 to falsify Soviet history and create a new, thoroughly reactionary, narrative.

The subject that Kotkin tackles is a complex and demanding one. Many authors have tried to unravel the Stalin enigma, and Kotkin's book joins an already crowded field. Indeed, there has been an astounding proliferation of biographies about Stalin in recent years. Among the more than 3,000 texts published in many languages, over 2,200 biographies have appeared in various editions since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Biographies in English (over 1,000) outnumber those in all other languages, with Russian not far behind. The periodical literature has also been vast. An annotated bibliography published in 2007 (endnote 1) lists 1,700 articles appearing by 2005 in English alone.

This enormous number of books and articles reflects the undying fascination with and perplexity over Stalin's life. In the early 1920s, this relatively unknown Bolshevik seemed to come out of nowhere to assume ever increasing political power. He eventually ousted rivals who were undoubtedly more popular, capable and principled than he. Twenty years after the revolution, he unleashed the Great Terror, which eliminated the vast majority of those who had led the October Revolution; among his victims, Stalin imprisoned, tortured and executed people who had been his party comrades in the pre-revolutionary and early Soviet periods.

Despite colossal political blunders—misreading economic development in the Soviet Union; advocating policies that led to colossal defeats in Britain, China, Germany, Spain and elsewhere; conducting a reckless collectivization campaign that produced a devastating famine in 1932-33; beheading the Red Army by killing more than 40,000 officers on the eve of the approaching Second World War; disorienting the entire workers' movement by concluding the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939—Stalin remained in power until his death in 1953. During his reign, the Soviet people made enormous sacrifices: 27 million perished in defeating Hitler alone. After almost 25 years of nearly absolute rule, Stalin left the Soviet Union crippled, and it never recovered from the catastrophic consequences—economically, politically, and culturally—of his policies.

The extraordinary career of this dictator poses many complex problems. How did such a man come to power? How did power affect him? And how did he become, as Trotsky said, “the grave-digger of the revolution”?

When Trotsky addressed these questions in his unfinished biography of Stalin (endnote 2), he was able to place Stalin's role within a theoretically informed narrative of the October Revolution. He was able to identify and

explain the social basis of Stalin's power: the growing Soviet bureaucracy that came to dominate the party and state apparatus.

Kotkin, by contrast, lacks a theoretically sound conception of the October Revolution and the complexities of the early Soviet regime. Here Kotkin's own political views (endnote 3) intrude far too often as he displays an unrestrained subjectivism in approaching his subject. Throughout the book, he mocks Marx, Lenin and especially Trotsky. He is determined, however, to anoint Stalin as a consistent Marxist and the true disciple of Lenin.

This is not the first time that Kotkin has argued that Marxism reaches its highest incarnation in the person of Stalin. In his only other major work, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (1995), Kotkin elevates Stalin (and Stalinism) to nothing less than the culmination of the Enlightenment!

In his new book, as Kotkin traces Stalin's ascension to power, he often seems baffled by the “paradoxes” of his subject, whether dealing with broader geopolitical issues leading up to the October Revolution and its aftermath, or with the personal characteristics of Stalin himself. By the time Kotkin is finished with this first volume, the Stalin that he produces is an “uncanny fusion of zealous Marxist convictions and great-power sensibilities, of sociopathic tendencies and exceptional diligence and resolve” [xi]. He is also “thin-skinned, two-faced, a nasty provocateur” [513]; he was “desperately making up spurious arguments, and showed himself to be thin-skinned, an intellectual bully” [524]; he “emerged a victor with a grudge, roiling with self-pity, resentment, victimhood” [591]. “Stalin's malevolence was palpable” [719]; and lastly, Kotkin highlights “Stalin's extreme vindictiveness” [723]. Perhaps to balance what threatens to become an overly negative portrayal of his paradoxical hero, Kotkin hastens to add that “he could also switch on the charm, and he proved to be a loyal patron to those ‘under his wing’” [465].

Kotkin is convinced that Stalin's intellectual powers have been profoundly underestimated by most biographers. Yet his evidence often undermines his thesis. While repeatedly trying to prove that Stalin was a major Marxist theoretician, Kotkin writes: “Few knew that he had plagiarized whole cloth his ‘Anarchism or Socialism?’ (1906–7) from the deceased Giorgi Teliya. Now, for his ‘Foundations of Leninism,’ he plagiarized *Lenin's Doctrine of Revolution*, a manuscript by the still-living Filipp Ksenofontov” [544]. Unlike other leading Marxists, who spent much of World War I analyzing the causes behind the collapse of the Second International and the outbreak of the first imperialist war, “the future arbiter of all thought left no wartime thoughts whatsoever, not even a diary” [153]. Years later, “Stalin's inability to understand fascism was sorely evident” [550]. And yet, Kotkin makes the absurd claim that “Stalin defeated Trotsky on the plane where the Georgian was perceived as most vulnerable yet proved strong—ideology” [591]. Here Kotkin elevates Stalin's theory of building socialism in one country to the summits of human thought. Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which accurately outlined the moving forces of the Russian Revolutions

(of 1905 and 1917) and embodied the internationalism of both Lenin and Trotsky, is passed over in silence. Many historians have amply demonstrated that Stalin's reactionary nationalist perspective is incompatible with Marxism, but Kotkin blithely dismisses them all.

Ultimately, Kotkin's proof of Stalin's Marxism is based on the repetition of unsubstantiated phrases: "Stalin's immersion in Marxism" [427]; "Stalin returned again and again to the touchstone of Lenin's writings. The fundamental fact about him was that he viewed the world through Marxism" [462]; "What is clear is that he was marinated in Communist ideology" [470]; "As Lenin's would-be faithful pupil, Stalin emerged in 1924-25 as both an ideologue ('capital,' 'the bourgeoisie,' 'imperialism') and an embryonic geostrategic thinker" [532]. In this regard, Kotkin reveals his great displeasure with one of the most authoritative historians of the Soviet Union, E.H. Carr: "Carr, for example, wrongly called Stalin's Marxism merely 'skin deep'" [855]. Despite his best efforts, Kotkin does little to refute Carr's assessment.

Before turning to some of the many instances of outright historical falsification in Kotkin's book, a few comments must be made about the book's structure, the use (or misuse) of source material and the author's writing style.

### Structure, Sources and Style

Of the book's 950 pages, the main text covers 739 pages and the notes 122 pages. The bibliography is 52 pages long, and there is a fairly comprehensive 35-page index. In a public lecture last fall, Kotkin said that he has been working on the first two volumes for 11 years, plowing through a vast amount of new archival material and original documentation, much of which he borrowed from other published works. Indeed, there are about 4,000 endnotes set in irritatingly small type at the back of this first volume. The sheer number of notes has led many reviewers to praise Kotkin's "prodigious research" [Serge Schmemmann in the *New York Times*], "astounding feat of historical research" [Jay Elwes in *Prospect Magazine*], "enormous cast of historical figures" [Edward Wilson in the *Independent*], and "vast body of evidence, published and archival, that he has consulted" [Martin Miller].

These reviewers should have been more guarded in their enthusiasm. If one begins the arduous task of checking Kotkin's notes, it quickly emerges that an astonishing number of them contain errors, false interpretations and unfounded assertions. Far too often, Kotkin gets dates wrong, volumes wrong and cites incorrect page numbers. At a certain point, this reviewer had to give up counting questionable citations. There is much extraneous material that should have been cut: after Kotkin describes the 1923 "cave meeting" of Zinoviev, Bukharin and others in Kislovodsk, does the reader really have to learn that "The Harvard historian of Russia Richard Pipes happened to be born in Poland the day after the cave meeting (July 11)" [note 204, p. 827]? In addition, typographical errors abound, as do mistakes in transliteration, which is unusual for a respected publishing house (Penguin Press). One gets the feeling that this book was hastily rushed into print, for no obvious reason. Such sloppiness, coupled with Kotkin's blatantly tendentious approach to his subject matter, suggests a political rather than a scholarly agenda.

In a rare moment of candor, Kotkin seems to acknowledge that he was overwhelmed by the material: "This book is ... based upon exhaustive study of scans as well as microfilms of archival material and published primary source documents, which for the Stalin era have proliferated almost beyond a single individual's capacity to work through them" [xii].

Given that the bibliography contains about 3,000 books and articles, this reviewer concludes that Kotkin indeed lacked the capacity to work

through them and faithfully assimilate their content. In some cases his failings are obvious: despite listing 35 entries for works by Trotsky, Kotkin rarely cites any significant passage from Trotsky's writings and shows little or no knowledge of Trotsky's actual views. And even the bibliographical entries themselves contain errors: Kotkin lists 21 volumes of Trotsky's *Sochineniia* [Works] published in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. In fact, 12 volumes were issued in 15 books before Stalin halted the entire project in 1927. It is highly doubtful that Kotkin has read even a fraction of the pages in Trotsky's writings listed in the bibliography. He certainly does not show that he has comprehended them.

The situation is not much better with the hefty volumes of documents published from the previously closed Soviet archives over the last 20 years. Kotkin readily borrows from Viktor Danilov's five-volume *Tragediia sovetsoi derevni* [Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside], especially the first volume [May 1927-November 1929, 880 pages]. He also refers to the five-volume *Kak lomali NEP* [How the NEP Was Destroyed. Stenographic Records of the VCP(b) Central Committee Plenums, 1928-1929], each volume of which contains 500-700 pages of material. In the ten pages he devotes to the Shakhty Trial of 1928, he can draw on the two-volume *Shakhtinskii protsess 1928 g.* [1,088 and 976 pages]. Kotkin occasionally dips into the ten-volume series, "*Sovershenno-sekretno*": *Lubianka-Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922-1934)* ["Top Secret": *Lubianka to Stalin on the State of the Nation (1922-1934)*]. Lastly, there is the volume containing A. M. Plekhanov's 527-page commentary on 134 documents in *VChK-OGPU v gody novoi ekonomicheskoi politiki 1921-1928* [The VeCheKa and OGPU in the Years of the New Economic Policy 1921-1929]. For a scrupulous historian, these volumes contain an embarrassment of riches. For a historian selecting archival material to fit a preconceived narrative, there is the danger of tearing passages out of context and misusing them, sometimes called "cherry-picking." Kotkin is unfortunately guilty of this latter practice, as we will show below. But first a few more words on sources.

This is a highly derivative work, depending on several key books. As Kotkin himself acknowledges: "It is hard to imagine what Part I of this volume would look like without its reliance on the scrupulous work of Aleksandr Ostrovskii concerning the young Stalin" [*Kto stoial za spinoi Stalina* [Who Stood Behind Stalin's Back] — F.W.] [xii]. In descending order, the most frequently cited historians are: Dmitry Volkogonov (Russian author of perestroika-era biographies of Stalin, Lenin and Trotsky); E.H. Carr (whom Kotkin often tries to rebuke, calling him at one point "Utterly, eternally wrong" [739]); Valentin Sakharov (an arch-Stalinist historian at Moscow University, without whom many of Kotkin's arguments would collapse); the right-wing Harvard professor Richard Pipes (whom Kotkin treats with near reverence); Isaac Deutscher (author of major biographies of both Trotsky and Stalin, whom Kotkin grudgingly quotes); Robert Tucker (Kotkin's earlier mentor at Princeton, whose psycho-history of Stalin he often questions); the aforementioned Ostrovskii; Simon Sebag Montefiore (a journalist/historian whose *Young Stalin*, even Kotkin admits, "reads like a novel" [741]); Alexander Rabinowitch (subject of Kotkin's petulance: "Incredibly, Rabinowitch (again) argues that dictatorship was forced upon Lenin and the Bolsheviks" [note 4, p. 804]); and many others.

Significantly there are major historians who are either rarely mentioned or completely ignored. Moshe Lewin authored two unparalleled studies, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power*, and *Lenin's Last Struggle*, but there are only 21 references to his works. With the second book, the reason is obvious: Lewin's book demolishes the arguments put forward by Valentin Sakharov in his "*Politicheskoe zaveshchanie*" *Lenina* [Lenin's "Political Testament"], where the Moscow professor claims that several of Lenin's last dictations, letters and articles were forgeries. Kotkin whole-heartedly embraces this theory as he attempts to prove that Lenin simply could not

have allied with Trotsky against Stalin in the last months of his political life.

Given Kotkin's full acceptance of Sakharov's unabashedly pro-Stalinist work, it is at first unclear why he omits any reference to the major two-volume *Politicheskaya biografii Stalina* [*Political Biography of Stalin, 2004*] by N. I. Kapchenko. Despite Kapchenko's favorable treatment of Stalin and relatively critical treatment of Trotsky, however, he states unequivocally: "Without going into details and nuances, I will note that the documents scholars have at their disposal and the testimony of an enormous number of people give not the slightest grounds for questioning the irrefutable fact of the existence of Lenin's political testament" [638]. There will be more to say about this topic later.

The most glaring omission in Kotkin's book is that he totally ignores Vadim Rogovin's seven-volume series, *Was There an Alternative [to Stalinism]?* (1991-2002). In his unsurpassed study, Rogovin set himself the task of meticulously reconstructing the issues and struggles within the Bolshevik Party from 1923 to 1940. He demonstrates that there was substantial opposition to the emerging Stalinist regime at every point. Whatever Kotkin's political viewpoint, if he were a conscientious historian he would be compelled to refer to this seminal work on the early Soviet period and demonstrate where he believes Rogovin's assessment misses the mark. To just ignore him is unacceptable from the standpoint of serious historical research and suggests once again that Kotkin has a political and ideological agenda rather than a scholarly one. Kotkin cannot argue that he is unaware of the existence of Rogovin's writings: he frequently cites Donald Rayfield's *Stalin's Hangmen* (2004). In the bibliography to his work, Rayfield prominently marks four out of six volumes listed by Rogovin as "Sources to which I am heavily indebted" [495-496].

The last source rarely mentioned is Stephen Cohen's 1973 biography of Bukharin. Why Kotkin only refers to his former Princeton colleague's work six times is somewhat of a mystery. Does a comparison of Stalin to Bukharin diminish the former? Since Bukharin played a significant role, both as an ally and then as an opponent of Stalin, one would expect a more serious treatment of this important figure in Kotkin's book.

### **Kotkin's style**

Despite occasional claims to the contrary, Kotkin is a poor writer. Some of his formulations deserve little more than derision: "Lenin clung to imperial Germany like sea rust on the underside of a listing ship" [284]; "Here was the eureka moment: from bottom to top, and places in between, the ideas and practices of revolutionary class war produced the Soviet state" [291]; "A far cry from the hissing and cursing Stalin had undergone five years earlier in Tiflis, when he had left a meeting hall with his head between his legs" [600]; "Stalin had fought on the Boredom and Mosquito Front—that is, he had wallowed for years as a political exile in the alternately frozen or thawed swamps of the far north" [949]; "Be that as it may, it was not Kamenev who had initiated the cockamamie tête-a-tête in the territory of the tightly watched Kremlin" [716].

Kotkin's bad writing comes from the fact that he cannot find a language that is appropriate to the subject. There is an aesthetic component of historical writing that simply eludes him. The metaphors he chooses are impossible, and one wonders where he comes up with these and other examples.

For a venerable Princeton professor and UC Berkeley Ph.D., Kotkin often slips into substandard colloquialisms: "a young political climber named Lavrenti Beria ate him for lunch"[854]; Lenin was "badmouthing the other Marxists in the Soviet" [200]; "The idea of counterrevolution

was the gift that kept on giving" [290]; "But if Lenin sensed that his war commissar had gotten too big for his britches, the Bolshevik leader continued to give every indication that Trotsky remained indispensable" [329].

At times Kotkin indulges in inappropriate vulgarity: "The young Stalin had a penis, and he used it" [8]; [Rasputin] "was rumored to smell like a goat (from failing to bathe), and to screw like one, too" [159]. Such passages are crude and sophomoric; they beg the question: Who is Kotkin's audience? He is writing for an unserious, right-wing readership.

And then there are simple banalities: "Revolutions are like earthquakes: they are always being predicted, and sometimes they come" [164]. "Lenin supposedly expressed surprise. (He could feign surprise.)" [789]. Or displays of adolescent cynicism: "John Reed, the former Harvard cheerleader" [201]. Is this really the best way to characterize the socialist author of one of the most vivid portrayals of the October Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*? Perhaps Kotkin is trying to suggest that Reed is not a figure to be taken seriously because his eyewitness accounts barely mention Stalin (only twice in passing). Kotkin has quite a different agenda in his biography of the man who simply went unnoticed in the crucial days of October.

One last note: to grasp the vast amount of material in Russian that Kotkin claims to have read, he would need to have a strong command of the Russian language. His knowledge of Russian, however, is questionable. Although most of the passages Kotkin translates from Russian appear acceptable, there are enough mistakes to wonder what is going on. They should have been caught in the editing process, but ultimately they are Kotkin's responsibility. While all nonnative speakers make mistakes, the way that Kotkin mispronounces names in his online videos, for instance, does not inspire confidence (endnote 4). One gets the impression that, despite frequent name-dropping in his interviews, he has rarely discussed the historical figures he describes with native Russians. Perhaps he doesn't care. Or perhaps he just has a tin ear when it comes to names or places. But at the very least, he mispronounces Evdokimov, Fotiyeva, Volodicheva, Vozdvizhenka... In the written text, he confuses the name of the prominent Left Oppositionist Eltsin (?????) with Yeltsin (?????); throughout the book, he misspells Zinoviev's surname (Radomylsky instead of Radomyslsky).

Kotkin compounds the errors by needlessly de-Russifying the names of any Bolsheviks who were of non-Russian origin: Dzerzhinsky becomes Dzierzy?ski, Menzhinsky becomes M??y?ski, Yan Rudzutak is J?nis Rudzutaks, and Sultan-Galiev morphs into Soltan?äliev [the index even misspells this one]. The many readers who may already struggle with the standard transliteration of Russian names are not helped by this added layer of linguistic difficulty. And I doubt that it assists the Anglophone reader to see Iosif Dzhughashvili turned into Ioseb Jughashvili [necessitating a "see Stalin, Iosif" in the index]; I suppose we should be thankful for not being presented with ?????? [Georgian]. Kotkin claims in one of his public lectures that he wanted to stress the multicultural composition of the Russian Empire. There are better ways to make that point than by burdening the reader with an idiosyncratic presentation of names.

### **Major errors of historical interpretation and direct falsification**

Whatever other errors abound in the book, the overall historical narrative that Kotkin produces is the most objectionable. Earlier, in his dissertation (1988) and resultant book, *Magnetic Mountain* (1995), Kotkin paid special tribute to the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, a notoriously eclectic thinker influenced by Nietzsche and

Heidegger. Today, he modestly recalls that *Magnetic Mountain* “is a case study of the Stalin epoch from a street-level perspective in the form of a total history of a single industrial town” [xi]. Whether the earlier approach taken by Kotkin can be attributed to Foucault is a topic that would require special investigation. In the new Stalin biography, however, what Kotkin promises is nothing less than “a history of the world from Stalin’s office,” albeit “less granular in examination of the wider society—the little tactics of the habitat” [ibid.].

In contrast, let us consider the tasks of the historian as described by someone Kotkin despises:

The history of a revolution, like every other history, ought first of all to tell what happened and how. That, however, is little enough. From the very telling it ought to become clear why it happened thus and not otherwise. Events can neither be regarded as a series of adventures, nor strung on the thread of some preconceived moral. They must obey their own laws. The discovery of these laws is the author’s task [Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Pluto Press, 1977, p. 17].

Trotsky, of course, wrote as a Marxist, as one of the most brilliant advocates of the materialist approach to history. At the heart of discovering the laws expressed in the unfolding historical events, Trotsky would meticulously examine “the economic bases of the society and its social substratum of classes” in the society “seized by revolution, [where] classes are in conflict” [ibid.].

Trotsky also addressed the question of the historian’s “impartiality”:

The serious and critical reader will not want a treacherous impartiality, which offers him a cup of conciliation with a well-settled poison of reactionary hate at the bottom, but a scientific conscientiousness, which for its sympathies and antipathies—open and undisguised—seeks support in an honest study of the facts, a determination of their real connections, an exposure of the causal laws of their movement. That is the only possible historic objectivism, and moreover it is amply sufficient, for it is verified and attested not by the good intentions of the historian, for which only he himself can vouch, but by the natural laws revealed by him of the historic process itself [ibid., p. 21].

Kotkin will have none of this. His antipathy toward Marxism, and toward Lenin and Trotsky in particular, is unrestrained throughout the book. As an undisguised proponent of postmodernism, he evinces a persistent rejection of any objective laws that must be discovered, or, for that matter, of the very concept of class. Some examples:

“Lenin, notwithstanding all the fog of his class categories, well understood the possibility of a German-Japanese alliance” [266]. “Trotsky, for all his Marxist invocation of the supposed laws of history, would feel constrained to admit that without Lenin, there would have been no October Revolution” [222]. “But the Bolsheviks, unlike their enemies, boasted that they had an all-encompassing, scientific answer to everything, and they expended considerable resources to disseminate their ideology” [292]. “The documents, whether those made public at the time or kept secret, are absolutely saturated with Marxist-Leninist ways of thinking and vocabulary—the proletariat, Bonapartism, the petit bourgeoisie, imperialism, capitalist encirclement, class enemies, military specialists, NEPmen, Kulaks, socialism” [420]. “Beyond Moscow’s two-faced foreign policy, aiming to foment revolution in the very countries

they were trying to have normal relations and trade with, lay the debilitating class-based worldview” [443].

Kotkin certainly does not conceal his “sympathies and antipathies.” He treats both Lenin and Trotsky with undisguised contempt, while elevating Stalin to something of a demiurge by the end of the book. Having earlier asserted that “Lenin was essentially a pamphleteer” [229], Kotkin condescendingly states: “Lenin understood next to nothing of Russian agriculture, land utilization, migrant labor, or the actual operations of the peasant commune, let alone market incentives” [299]. Anyone the least bit familiar with Lenin’s masterful writings on the development of capitalism in Russia, or his detailed studies of Russian and world agriculture, would be astounded by Kotkin’s statements.

Two more ludicrous claims: “Once in power, Lenin elevated political violence to principle” [409], and “Lenin was running foreign affairs as a personal fief” [446.] Meanwhile, as Stalin was “learning on the job, and often failing” [419], Kotkin assures the reader, “That was not merely because of his plentiful shortcomings but also because Lenin had helped conjure into being both an ideologically blinkered dictatorship and a costly global antagonism” [ibid.]. But Kotkin’s Stalin rises to the challenge, and in doing so seems to tower over Lenin: “It was Stalin who formed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, helped make the recuperative New Economic Policy work, and spelled out the nature of Leninism for the party mass” [ibid.].

### **Kotkin on Trotsky**

The image of Trotsky that emerges in Kotkin’s book rarely surpasses a Stalinist caricature of Trotsky’s life and politics. Although he vowed that there would be no speculation in the book, when it comes to Trotsky, Kotkin accepts the most unfounded assertions of the Stalinist historian Valentin Sakharov and gleefully quotes obvious lies repeated by Viacheslav Molotov (1890-1986) in late-life interviews with Felix Chuev. In their reported accounts of the period, Molotov and Lazar Kaganovich (1893-1991) served as two of the most long-lived and unapologetic Stalinists of all time. Kotkin uncritically accepts every epithet they hurl at Trotsky.

Kotkin spends pages using Trotsky as a foil to illustrate Stalin’s supposed greatness. In almost every historical episode he describes, therefore, Kotkin denigrates Trotsky’s role and lauds Stalin’s. To accomplish this feat, Kotkin has to refute almost every non-Stalinist historian who has come before. This is no small task. To diminish Trotsky as a historical figure, Kotkin not only has to debunk Deutscher, Carr, Lewin, Rabinowitch, Daniels, Knei-Paz, Day, Rogovin and others, but also those less sympathetic to Trotsky like Souvarine, Volkogonov, Medvedev and Cohen.

Even Trotsky’s sharpest critics usually acknowledge his skill as a writer. Kotkin, however, brazenly refers to Trotsky’s writings as “gobbledygook” [524] and “rants” [632]. The latter comment refers to a principled letter from Trotsky to Krupskaya on 17 May, 1927, in which he writes: “Stalin and Bukharin are betraying Bolshevism at its very core, its proletarian revolutionary internationalism... The defeat of the German revolution in 1923, the defeats in Bulgaria and Estonia, the defeat of the [1926] general strike in England, and of the Chinese revolution in April have all seriously weakened international Communism.”

This passage, for Kotkin, passes for “rants,” but he has no misgivings about Stalin’s denunciation of Trotsky at a Politburo meeting on 8 September, 1927: “You are pathetic, without any sense of truth, a coward, a bankrupt, insolent and impudent, who allows himself to speak of things utterly at variance with reality” [642-643; as happens all too frequently,

Kotkin incorrectly cites these words. They are on page 594 rather than on 597 as given in endnote 239, p. 850: “Vatlin, *Stenogrammy zasedanii Politbiuro*, II: 597.” Kotkin also conflates this excerpt with another outburst by Stalin that follows two pages later in the transcript, on page 596. He reverses their order so that Stalin’s words cited above appear to address Trotsky’s reference to Lenin’s “Testament,” whereas in fact they refer to Trotsky’s objections over lies that Stalin was spreading about Trotsky’s role in the Civil War].

Kotkin strikes all the wrong notes when he deals with Trotsky’s Jewish origins. Most recently, Robert Service discredited himself with his ham-fisted treatment of this issue in his biography of Trotsky. (endnote 5) Kotkin follows in Service’s footsteps as he writes the following:

Trotsky was Jewish but, like almost all intellectuals and revolutionaries in the Russian empire, wholly assimilated into Russian culture, and to boot, he had striking blue eyes and an unprominent nose, yet he claimed to feel his Jewishness as a political limitation. Peasants certainly knew he was a Jew [340].

Leaving aside the “striking blue eyes” and “unprominent nose” (apparently contradicting Kotkin’s zoological concept of Jewishness), let us consider the claim that “Peasants certainly knew he was a Jew.” Kotkin was obviously determined to insert this sweeping generalization into his book—it is repeated twice with only slight variation in the same paragraph, and dutifully cited twice in the endnotes. But repeating the citation does not make it any more compelling. It refers to a single incident recounted by N. Valentinov in his book published by Hoover Institution Press in Russian in 1971, *The New Economic Policy and the Party Crisis after the Death of Lenin*:

I first learned about the great respect [for Lenin] among the peasants in 1922, when I happened to be in the village of Vasilievskoe about 60 versts [60 km] from Moscow. One local peasant began to explain to me in great detail that Lenin was a Russian, that he respected the peasants and didn’t allow them to be robbed or driven into collective farms. But the other ruler—Trotsky—was a Jew who didn’t care about the peasants; he didn’t know, value or want to know about their labor or [way of] life [Valentinov, p. 88].

As Kotkin should certainly know, to extend the views of this one peasant to the 120 million peasants in the Soviet Union of the time is simply unwarranted. But in attempts to bolster his case that Trotsky’s Jewishness was a dominant issue, he proceeds to cite “America’s Red Cross chief in Russia,” White-Guard periodicals, a single letter to Trotsky in 1919, a quote from the London *Times* of 1919, an émigré linguist’s book from 1923 [“Many Soviet Communists themselves could be overheard to say Shmolny for Smolny (Jewish ‘sh’) or prezhidium (Jewish ‘sidium’) for presidium”], and a 1921 German book depicting “all the Jewish Bolsheviks, with a preface to the text by Alfred Rosenberg”. In his citation of the Rosenberg reference, Kotkin also includes a quote from the Nazi propagandist’s book, *Der jüdische Bolschewismus* [Jewish Bolshevism].

Kotkin follows this incoherent string of examples with an astonishing few lines:

At the top, only the Georgian Jughashvili-Stalin was not partly

Jewish. The Jewishness of Lenin’s maternal grandmother was then unknown, but other leaders were well known to be Jews and it did not inhibit them: Zinoviev had been born Ovsei-Gershon Radomylsky [sic!] and used his mother’s surname Apfelbaum; Kamenev, born Lev Rozenfeld, had a Jewish father; both had Jewish wives (ft. 353). Trotsky-Bronstein managed to be a lightning rod not just in his Jewishness but in all ways [340-341].

This passage is not an exploration of how, for instance, Stalin used anti-Semitism in his fight against his political opponents, and against Trotsky in particular (endnote 6). It is an awkward and error-filled repetition of drivel usually found in fascistic screeds. In reading it, one suspects that someone either inserted material, unbeknownst to Kotkin, or Kotkin carelessly contradicted himself by adding passages that he had himself written at an earlier time. Thus, for example, Kotkin inserts a “(!)” when he writes: “The London Times asserted (March 5, 1919) that three quarters (!) of the leading positions in Soviet Russia were held by Jews” [340]. One might conclude that Kotkin feels that the figure of three quarters was an exaggeration. But on the same page we learn in Kotkin’s own words that “At the top, only the Georgian Jughashvili-Stalin was not partly Jewish.” First of all, this is factually untrue, but any reader would be justified in asking the real Kotkin to stand up. And would he please explain why the Jewishness of Lenin’s maternal grandmother is relevant here at all?

Before passing on to other issues, this reviewer would also like Kotkin to explain how “Trotsky-Bronstein managed to be a lightning rod not just in his Jewishness but in all ways.” This is not history but falsification.

### Stalin versus Trotsky

As stated earlier, Kotkin elevates Stalin above Trotsky throughout the book. Often, this requires considerable sleight of hand. It is well known, for instance, that in 1905 Trotsky was elected chairman of the Petersburg Soviet not long before the members of the Soviet were arrested by the tsarist regime. Trotsky not only played a leading role in the capital’s revolutionary council during the Revolution of 1905, but as he awaited trial in December and early January, he began writing an analysis of the revolution that later turned into the book *Our Revolution*. A significant portion of the book was published as *Results and Prospects*, not only before 1917, but reprinted in 1919, after the successful revolution of October 1917. It is here that Trotsky clearly outlined his concept of permanent revolution, demonstrating that the working class, supported by the peasantry in the countryside, could establish a dictatorship in Russia as the initial step in the socialist revolution that would have to extend into the more advanced countries of Europe if the first workers’ state were to survive.

In stark contrast, Stalin’s role in 1905 was not very well known. When Trotsky was writing a biography of Stalin in 1939-1940, he weighed the contradictory and sketchy accounts that forced him to ask: “What did Koba actually do in 1905?” Trotsky concluded that Stalin’s activities in the Caucasus, despite later attempts to portray them as heroic, were rather nondescript.

Kotkin, however, bases himself on Aleksandr Ostrovskii’s 2002 book (*Who Stood Behind Stalin’s Back*) and assures us that “during the Russo-Japanese War,...Stalin was raising hell in Georgian manganese mines” [185]. In 1905, 3,700 manganese miners went on strike and came under attack in the remote Georgian town of Chiatura. “In response to the physical attacks, Jughashvili [Stalin] helped transform Social Democratic

agitation ‘circles’ into red combat brigades called Red Hundreds. By December 1905, the worker Red Hundreds, assisted by young radical thugs, seized control of Chiatura and thus of half of global manganese output.... Organizing mass direct action, Jugashvili was in his radical element—he helped transform nearly every mine into a battleground of Social Democratic Party factions, importing loyalists from his previous underground activity, especially Batum. Some observers marveled at his clique’s intense loyalty. All the same, the Chiatura workers elected as their leader not Jugashvili but a tall, thin, charismatic Georgian youth named Noe Ramishvili....” [76-78].

Let us recall that, during 1905, 2.75 million people were on strike throughout the Russian Empire. In October, a general strike shut down the capital, Petersburg, and in December, heavy fighting broke out in Moscow that was bloodily suppressed by government troops. Yet, one could easily conclude, after reading Kotkin’s narrative of events, that Stalin’s exploits in Georgia overshadowed Trotsky’s leading role in Petersburg during that crucial year. Kotkin makes such absurd claims in order to downplay any suggestions that Stalin was later “out of his element” during the mass meetings, demonstrations and final seizure of power in 1917.

Although by any reasonable measure, Stalin’s role in 1917 was dwarfed by Trotsky’s as the latter guided the first successful socialist revolution, Kotkin wants the reader to believe that the articles Stalin wrote for the Bolshevik press at the time were nearly as significant as Trotsky’s organization of the seizure of power as head of the Revolutionary Military Committee.

In fact, Kotkin’s entire treatment of 1917 is extremely distorted. He insists that the October Revolution had little popular support, describing it variously as “the Bolshevik putsch [218]”; “the Bolshevik October 1917 coup, nominally against the Provisional Government but really against the Soviet” [223]; “the far-fetched Bolshevik coup” [296]; “this crazy putsch” [227]; and “Lenin’s shock coup of 1917” [421]. Similar claims have been thoroughly answered in the opening chapter of David North’s *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*: “The Bolshevik Seizure of Power in October 1917: Coup d’État or Revolution?” But Kotkin wants to go even further in falsifying the October Revolution: “the Communist regime had come into being as a result of a coup, and, while claiming to rule in the name of the proletariat, executed proletarians who dared to question the party’s self-assigned monopoly” [418]. This lie, as with many others, is not substantiated by any evidence, documentary or otherwise. Kotkin, however, asserts it as a given.

Lastly, Kotkin’s description of the October revolution as “Dadaesque,”—something he seems particularly proud of—is simply bizarre. In the framework of this review, it hardly bears mentioning. By comparison, Kotkin’s treatment of the following historical events is much worse:

**The Civil War:** Kotkin spends most of his time attempting to prove that Trotsky was despised by the Red Army (relying partially on the outdated and inaccurate book by Francesco Benvenuti, *The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922*, first published in English in 1988). He gives a distorted picture of the military debate at the Eighth Party Congress in 1919, where Trotsky’s theses on the military, defended by Lenin, were accepted over the vigorous opposition by Stalin, Voroshilov and Budenny. At one point, Kotkin claims, “Benvenuti established the depth and breadth of animosity to Trotsky early on” [790] and refers the reader to page 216 of Benvenuti’s book. On that page, the Italian historian “established” no such degree of animosity, and certainly not its “depth and breadth.” He cites some of the charges made against Trotsky during the heated debate at the Congress, and then notes: “These accusations have survived a considerable length of time in Soviet works. In actual fact, Trotskii never pushed certain of his positions to their extreme conclusions” [Benvenuti, p. 216]. These caveats, however, did not prevent Kotkin from drawing his

own extreme conclusions.

In judging Trotsky’s performance as leader of the Red Army during the Civil War, Lenin famously said to the writer Gorky in 1919: “Show me another man able to organize almost a model army within a single year and win the respect of the military specialists. We have such a man” [329]. Stalin had these words removed from later Soviet editions of Gorky’s reminiscences. Kotkin inexplicably feels that they were spoken by Lenin about his war commissar who “had gotten too big for his britches” [Ibid.]. And yet he grudgingly admits: “Had Lenin allowed Stalin and his band a complete victory over Trotsky in July 1919, the outcome of the other battle—the civil war against the Whites—might have turned out differently” [Ibid.]. Indeed, how “the other battle” might have turned out will be seen shortly with the Polish War of 1920.

**The First Four Congresses of the Communist International (1919-1922):** Trotsky wrote several of the most important founding documents of the Third (Communist) International in 1919; along with Lenin, he delivered many of the main reports to the first four congresses. Kotkin does little more than mock the Comintern; perhaps he is reluctant to examine it with any seriousness because Stalin played a relatively minor role in these years. At the second Congress, for instance, Kotkin describes what the delegates ate, where they stayed, and what plays they watched, but barely mentions any of the political issues that arose except the attention paid to the Polish campaign in July and August 1920. After Lenin’s death, the Comintern began undergoing “Bolshevization” at the hands of Zinoviev, Bukharin and Stalin (all trying to drive Trotsky from prominence). Kotkin pays slightly more attention to the Fifth Congress in 1924, but even here the analysis is extremely superficial and mainly directed at suggesting Trotsky’s political decline: “Stalin took over Trotsky’s seat on the Comintern executive committee” [550]. This is followed by reference to “the interminable denunciations of Trotsky and his foreign ‘stooges,’” but Kotkin does not explain who the “stooges” were, and what fundamental issues were at stake.

**The Polish campaign of 1920:** After Polish forces under Pilsudki invaded Soviet territory in March 1920, the Red Army drove them back and continued to advance on Warsaw, hoping that Polish workers would rise against their own bourgeoisie and establish a Soviet Poland. Stalin was in charge of forces advancing toward Lwów /Lviv, toward the south of Warsaw. Kotkin tries to portray Stalin’s blatant insubordination during the campaign in as positive a light as possible. Stalin’s refusal in early August to send his forces north toward Warsaw contributed significantly to the Red Army’s nearly catastrophic defeat, a fact that Stalin, Voroshilov and others worked mightily to conceal in later years. On August 17, Stalin “requested to be relieved of all his military duties” [365]. Kotkin laconically notes: “on September 1, 1920, the politburo accepted Stalin’s resignation from his military posts. The way was open to scapegoat his insubordination” [Ibid.].

Stalin indeed had to defend himself against sharp criticism by Trotsky, Lenin and others at the Ninth Party Conference in September 1920. In 2014, however, Kotkin steps forward as his advocate. In a curious section entitled “No Glory,” Kotkin renders Lenin almost incoherent and seems particularly bemused by Tukhachevsky’s words in a later book, *Pokhod za Vislu* [Campaign Beyond the Vistula]: “To export revolution was a possibility. Capitalist Europe was shaken to its foundations, and but for our strategic errors and our defeat in the field, the Polish War might have become the link between the October Revolution of 1917 and the revolution in Western Europe” [377-378]. Kotkin obviously dismisses the possibility of revolution in Western Europe and objects once again that “the proletarian Stalin, having warned against such adventurism, [was] scapegoated for insubordination” [378].

Kotkin’s presentation of a blameless Stalin who opposed the “adventurism” of Lenin (and Tukhachevsky) is simply untenable. On July 13, 1920, when Polish forces seemed in disarray, Stalin wrote in a

telegram to Lenin: "I don't think that imperialism has ever been as weak as it is now, at the moment of Poland's defeat, and we have never been as strong as we are now, so the more resolutely we behave ourselves, the better it will be for Russia and for international revolution." As the Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk notes: "On July 24, in a telegram to Lenin that treated victory over Poland as a foregone conclusion, [Stalin] proposed 'raising the question of organizing an insurrection in Italy and in such still precarious states as Hungary and Czechoslovakia (Romania will have to be crushed).'" (endnote 7) Why doesn't Kotkin characterize these telegrams from Stalin as proof of his "adventurism"? Kotkin is also well aware that Trotsky, rather than Stalin, was opposed to advancing into Poland, but he deferred to Lenin's judgement in the matter. At the time, only Rykov supported Trotsky. (endnote 8) But this well-known historical fact does not fit Kotkin's narrative.

Rather than explaining the historical consequences of the disastrous Polish campaign, Kotkin focuses on a comparatively insignificant detail: the glory that Stalin did not receive. Not long after the Polish defeat, the remaining White forces under Wrangel were driven out of Crimea. Kotkin concludes his sub-chapter with an odd lament for his hero: "There was no glory for Stalin: he had originally been assigned Wrangel's destruction, but had resigned his military posts over the Polish campaign" [379].

**The New Economic Policy (NEP):** At the 10th Party Congress, as the delegates were confronted by the crisis of the Kronstadt rebellion, Lenin introduced a shift in economic policy away from war communism to what became known as the New Economic Policy. Under this policy, forced grain requisition was replaced by a tax in kind and limited capitalist trade was allowed, giving peasants the opportunity to market their surpluses in the cities. The commanding heights of the economy (heavy industry, transport, etc.) remained under state control (and ownership). Kotkin portrays Trotsky as a determined enemy of NEP from beginning to end, which completely falsifies the historical record. He even claims in an endnote that "Trotsky's self-presentation in emigration of his alleged anticipation of NEP is wildly inaccurate" [note 274, p. 800].

One of the sources that Kotkin cites to substantiate his assertion is Viktor Danilov's 1990 article, "We are Starting to Learn about Trotsky" [*Ekho*, No. 1, 1990, pp. 47-62]. Danilov, one of the greatest specialists in the history of Soviet agriculture, comments on several chapters of Pierre Broué's biography of Trotsky that had recently been published in the Soviet press: "...it was Trotsky who in February 1920 proposed the abandonment of *prodrazviorstka*—compulsory deliveries of all 'surplus' grain, as defined by local officialdom—by a tax in kind.... To carry through these proposals would have led inevitably to a recognition and acceptance of market relations with the aim of revitalizing the peasant economy. This of course was to be the starting-point for the New Economic Policy of 1921.... In his analysis of Trotsky's views on NEP, Broué demonstrated convincingly their closeness to Lenin's." (endnote 9) In other words, Danilov writes the exact opposite of what Kotkin claims. (endnote 10)

Furthermore, throughout his twisted narrative, Kotkin invents Trotsky as one who was trying to become an economic dictator while Stalin was consolidating his control over the party: "Trotsky was busy trying to seize command over the economy.... But the kind of planning Trotsky desired was incompatible with the NEP" [481]. Here Kotkin obfuscates a genuine issue: how to increase the relative weight of the planned sector of the economy while reducing the market sector that could undermine the "smychka" [alliance] between the working class and peasantry. Trotsky would develop proposals to give the State Planning Commission (Gosplan) legislative powers, proposals that were initially opposed by Lenin in early 1922. Lenin would shift his position and agree with Trotsky in November.

The more theoretical sides of this issue would later be fought out not only by Trotsky, but by Preobrazhensky, a prominent supporter of Trotsky

in the Left Opposition. Bukharin would supply Stalin with most of the arguments attacking the Left Opposition's economic policy during the mid-1920s.

Kotkin never gives a truthful characterization of how Lenin judged Trotsky's views regarding the NEP. He writes: "Stalin accepted the NEP. To put the matter another way, in 1922, Stalin could have his party dictatorship and Lenin's NEP. Trotsky could not have his economic dictatorship and the NEP. This means that the charges of Trotskyism that Stalin would level, with all manner of distortions, nonetheless had some basis: Trotsky on the economy was forcefully pushing against Lenin's foundational policy" [486-487].

Kotkin does not refer to a document that overturns his argument completely. On November 25, 1922, Lenin wrote to Trotsky, with copies to Zinoviev, Bukharin, Radek, Stalin and Kamenev:

2. I have read your theses regarding the NEP and find them in general to be very good, and some formulations are extremely apt, but a small portion of the points seemed debatable to me. I would advise to print them for now in the newspapers, and then to republish them as a pamphlet without fail. With some commentary they will be particularly good for acquainting the foreign public with our new economic policy. (endnote 11)

Lenin clearly endorsed Trotsky's views on NEP, and wanted them widely circulated. The truth is that neither in 1922 nor later was Trotsky trying to become an "economic dictator" or "super industrializer" as Kotkin claims. These are recycled Stalinist lies that dominated Soviet historical accounts right up to the end of Perestroika. Nor should one forget that it would be Stalin who abruptly put an end to the NEP in 1928-1929 in such a reckless and voluntaristic manner that it would bring the Soviet Union to the brink of civil war.

**Stalin as the creator rather than the creation of the growing bureaucracy:** Kotkin takes strong exception to Trotsky's assessment of Stalin: "Trotsky famously wrote that 'Stalin did not create the apparatus. The apparatus created him.'" (footnote 19) This was exactly backward. Stalin created the apparatus, and it was a colossal feat" [424]. Once again, the evidence Kotkin provides contradicts his thesis. He clearly portrays the rapid growth of the party apparatus which was organized largely by Sverdlov before his death in March 1919: "Party committees mushroomed from under 600 in 1917 to 8,000 by 1919" [423]. By most accounts, Sverdlov mastered the intricacies of party appointments better than anyone else; after he died, various configurations of the central committee's secretariat struggled to replace the man who was seen as almost irreplaceable. At one point, three of Trotsky's closest comrades (Serebriakov, Preobrazhensky and Krestinsky) made up the secretariat, but they were replaced at the 10th Party Congress in 1921 in the wake of the acrimonious trade union debate of 1920.

In April 1922, Zinoviev proposed that Stalin become general secretary of the central committee. In *My Life*, Trotsky writes that Zinoviev's initiative "was quite against Lenin's will.... No one attached much importance to this appointment. Under Lenin, the post of general secretary, established by the tenth congress, could have only a technical character, never political. Yet Lenin had his fears. 'This cook will make only peppery dishes,' he would say of Stalin." (endnote 12) Lenin did not, however, block Stalin's appointment.

Kotkin notes that "Stalin now became the only person simultaneously in the politburo, orgburo, and secretariat" [424]. Oddly, Kotkin prefaces this statement with a quotation from Lenin: "'The power [vlast'] of the Central Committee is colossal.... We dispose of 200,000-400,000 party functionaries, and through them thousands upon thousands of nonparty

people. And this gigantic Communist cause is utterly befouled by foggy bureaucratism!” [Ibid.]. Kotkin avers that Stalin “proved capable of wielding the levers he inherited, and of inventing new ones.... Stalin, in his midforties, found his calling at the party apparatus” [Ibid.] With these statements, Kotkin inexplicably appears to be building a case not against Trotsky but against himself. He continues: “But what stands out most about Stalin’s ascendancy is that, structurally, he was handed the possibility of a personal dictatorship, and he began to realize that potential just by fulfilling the duties of general secretary. Stalin had exceptional power almost instantaneously” [424-425].

The extent of Stalin’s power can be partially grasped by the fact that “The orgburo made at least a thousand appointments just between April 1922 and March 1923, including no fewer than forty-two new provincial party bosses” [432]. With these appointments, Stalin could select the very people, loyal to him, who would be mobilized against the Left Opposition headed by Trotsky in the fall of 1923. The votes at central committee plenums were virtually predetermined by this appointment process, and inner-party democracy became alarmingly undermined. Although Lenin was not actively participating in the debates in late 1923, he did the most he could in late 1922 and early 1923 to address the problem of Stalin’s untrammelled power.

**The “troika” of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin** (also known as the triumvirate or triumvirs): Kotkin downplays the significance of the unprincipled faction formed by Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin against Trotsky within the Politburo during Lenin’s protracted illness starting in 1922. He even claims that “A consolidated ‘triumvirate’ against Trotsky had yet to form in summer 1923” [506]. Most historians place the formation of the troika in 1922, but stress that Zinoviev and Kamenev both considered Stalin to be their inferior, thereby underestimating his growing control over the levers of the party apparatus. Kotkin, however, not only postpones the troika’s formation, but recruits Molotov to make Lenin a co-conspirator against Trotsky: “Lenin proposed that we gather for the politburo meetings without Trotsky,” Molotov recalled. “We conspired against him” [415]. Unfortunately, Kotkin gives no proper citation to this passage in Chuev’s *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym* [*One Hundred Forty Conversations with Molotov*]. Even if it were true on its face, no date is provided for Molotov’s claim, rendering it useless as evidence for Kotkin’s argument. Indeed, the Molotov reference proves nothing, although Kotkin asserts, without any proof, that Molotov’s “recollections comport with the archival record” [415].

There is one document that Kotkin is decidedly reluctant to examine closely. On May 25-27, 1922, Lenin had his first major stroke. He left for the village of Gorki in the outskirts of Moscow to rest as much as possible and undergo treatment. Over the next four months, his medical condition improved enough for him to return to work in Moscow on October 2, 1922.

At some point (endnote 13), probably in July 1922, Lenin passed the following note to Kamenev:

**I think exaggerations can be avoided.** ‘(The Central Committee) is casting or is preparing to cast a healthy cannon overboard’, you write. **Isn’t that an immense exaggeration?** To throw Trotsky overboard—for you are hinting at that, there is no other interpretation—is the height of absurdity. If you do not consider me to have become hopelessly stupid, then how can you think of such a thing???? Bloody children in my eyes.... (endnote 14)

Without explanation, Kotkin omits the words in bold. The unjustifiable effect is to soften Lenin’s alarm. Kotkin’s only comment is the one

sentence with which he prefaced the note: “Around this time, Lenin reacted sharply to efforts by Kamenev and Stalin to reduce Trotsky’s position.” That’s all. He doesn’t consider any greater implications of Lenin’s words—i.e., how shocked Lenin was by the maneuvers against Trotsky during his absence from the Kremlin. Certainly Lenin could see the danger of a looming split in the Politburo. Nor does Kotkin link it to Lenin’s unquestionable turn to Trotsky in late 1922 and early 1923 in an attempt to curb the triumvirate’s power, and Stalin’s in particular.

### Lenin’s “Testament”

After Lenin returned to work in October 1922, he hardly spared himself as he attended meetings, gave speeches, wrote articles, conducted correspondence, etc. In November, several political issues emerged in which Lenin increasingly turned to Trotsky for support within the Politburo. This placed him more and more at odds with Stalin.

The first issue, the monopoly of foreign trade, is well documented and should not offer any opportunity for dramatic reinterpretation. This issue had been contested since early 1921, with Lenin insistently pursuing the same line throughout. Stalin and the majority of the Politburo repeatedly prepared resolutions to weaken the monopoly of foreign trade, allowing direct trade between private capitalists (Nepmen) in Russia and the world market. When Lenin learned of these proposals, he became extremely alarmed at their potential to undermine the entire Soviet economic system. Then, on October 6, at a Central Committee plenum that Lenin did not attend, a motion was passed limiting the state’s foreign trade monopoly.

It soon became clear that the only Politburo member who fully shared Lenin’s view was Trotsky. Lenin turned to him in several letters, and made it known to the rest of the Politburo that he was calling on Trotsky to defend their common views: [Lenin to Trotsky, December 13, 1922]: “...it is my request that at the forthcoming plenum you should undertake the defense of our common standpoint on the unquestionable need to maintain and consolidate the foreign trade monopoly” (endnote 15); [Lenin to Stalin, December 15, 1922]: “I have also come to an arrangement with Trotsky to stand up for my views of the foreign trade monopoly.” Later, the same day: “I am resolutely opposed to any delay on the question of the foreign trade monopoly. If the idea should arise, ... to postpone it until the next plenum, I should most resolutely object to this, because I am sure that Trotsky will be able to stand up for my views just as well as I myself. ... any further hesitation on this highly important question is absolutely intolerable and will tend to frustrate my work” (endnote 16); [Lenin to Trotsky, December 15, 1922]: “I consider that we have quite reached agreement. I ask you to declare our solidarity at the plenum.” (endnote 17)

On December 18, the plenum rescinded the relaxation of the foreign trade monopoly. Lenin then wrote to Trotsky on December 21: “It looks as though it has been possible to take the position without a single shot, by a simple maneuver. I suggest that we should not stop and should continue the offensive...” (endnote 18)

In a breathtakingly dishonest account of the above events, Kotkin writes: “This letter [Lenin to Stalin, December 15] would serve, in Trotsky’s memoirs, as evidence that Lenin had proposed that he and Trotsky form a ‘bloc’ on the trade monopoly, and that Lenin and Stalin suffered a break in relations over this question, on top of their national question contretemps. But in an exchange of letters around this time, both Lenin and Trotsky underscored not just their partial agreement (trade monopoly) but their continuing differences (planning). Moreover, on the trade monopoly, just as on the USSR structure, Stalin readily acceded to Lenin’s wishes. There was no bloc and no break” [483].



Matters get worse in the more complex issues of the national question (how Georgia would enter the structure of the Soviet Union; displays of Great Russian chauvinism toward the Georgian Communist Party during the heated debates over this question; Ordzhonikidze slapping a Georgian party member; Dzerzhinsky's and Stalin's defense of Ordzhonikidze, etc.); the debate over what powers to give the State Planning Commission (Gosplan); how to reorganize the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection (which Stalin had headed); and finally, how to prevent a split in the Central Committee and the Party as a whole if the disputes between Stalin and Trotsky grew even sharper in the wake of Lenin's impending death. (endnote 19)

In discussing these events, Kotkin plays a thoroughly dishonest game with the reader. Every document or testimony that does not fit his narrative, he dismisses as a forgery; any incident that violates his narrative, he claims never occurred. In order to concoct this string of falsifications, Kotkin has to turn the following people into unprincipled liars and conspirators: Trotsky, Krupskaya (Lenin's wife), Fotieva (one of Lenin's secretaries), Volodicheva (another of Lenin's secretaries), Maria Ulyanova (Lenin's sister), and at least some of the doctors attending Lenin. He also has to overturn the accounts given by the following historians: Carr, Deutscher, Daniels, Lewin, Volkogonov, Rogovin, Nazarov, Khlevniuk, Naumov, and many others. He also must dismiss Valentinov, Bazhanov and Avtorkhanov.

Kotkin takes advantage of potential confusion over what constitutes Lenin's "Testament." Most historians include all the letters, articles and dictations, taken together, from December 1922 through March 6, 1923. The Stalinist historian Valentin Sakharov, on whom Kotkin relies almost entirely in his analysis, accepts the authenticity of most of these items, but denies Lenin's authorship of the following items: "The Letter to the Congress" [dictations of 24-25 December 1922 and 4 January 1923]; the "notes" [more accurately: article] "On the Question of Nationalities or on 'Autonomization'"; and the letters to Trotsky [5 March 1923], Stalin [5 March 1923], and to Mdivani, Makharadze and others [6 March 1923] (endnote 20). Sakharov devotes more than 1000 pages to constructing an argument that few but the most ardent Stalinists find compelling. (endnote 21)

Kotkin certainly agrees with many of Sakharov's overt political attacks on both Lenin and Trotsky, but he sometimes takes a simpler approach: he suggests that Lenin was simply too ill to write or dictate the items in question. Lenin did indeed have at least four major strokes on May 25-27, 1922, December 13, December 22, and then March 9-10, 1923. The arteriosclerosis that was damaging portions of his brain finally resulted in his death on January 21, 1924. During the protracted period of several months, there were days of paralysis, inability to speak or other incapacitation. And almost miraculously, there were days of dramatic improvement. According to Valentinov, "Kramer, one of the doctors treating Lenin, always said that Lenin's vitality, the strength of his resistance to the illness, were a phenomenal occurrence in the history of this illness" [Valentinov, pp. 38-39]. In a splenetic sub-chapter called "Suspicious Dictation," Kotkin, however, quotes the same Dr. Kramer, in February 1923, to make quite another point: "Vladimir Ilich was finding it hard to recall either a word he wanted or he was unable to read what he had dictated to the secretary, or he would begin to say something completely incoherent" [489]. The reader might well conclude that Lenin could not have dictated his "Letter to the Congress" or his last letters in March if things were so bad in February. But Kotkin dishonestly cuts the first part of the quotation: "Professor Kramer recorded that hope for a recovery was sustained until March 1923, even though in February there were renewed signs of 'breaks in his speech, at first negligible, but then more significant, **though always fleeting**..." [Volkogonov, p. 421; emphasis added]. In an endnote, Kotkin adds: "Volkogonov correctly noted that 'it is remarkable that Lenin was capable of dictating these

lengthy works in such a short time...' But Volkogonov failed to connect the dots: Lenin indeed could not have dictated all that work." He also admonishes Lewin: "Moshe Lewin correctly grasped that the message of the alleged Lenin Testament, essentially, was to fight nationalism in favor of internationalism, to fight bureaucracy, especially the party leadership, and to remove Stalin, but Lewin did not question the legitimacy of the documents..." [note 186, p. 825].

Lewin did not question the legitimacy of the documents, because there are no grounds to do so. This does not mean that Kotkin doesn't try. To do so, he engages in pure speculation, something he claimed in the preface (and public lectures) that he would not do if he were lacking documentation: "Scholars have perpetuated Trotsky's falsehood concerning retention of the foreign trade monopoly that only he had won the day at the plenum on Lenin's behalf" [note 74, p. 821]; "Trotsky, in his memoirs, invented a conversation with Lenin about attacking the bureaucratism in the state but also in the party, specifically targeting the orgburo, Stalin's source of power" [note 75, p. 821]; "Stalin did not phone Krupskaya on December 22 and curse her out" [note 76, p. 822]; "Lenin was also credited with dictating 'Better Fewer but Better'... Trotsky claimed that he forced a meeting to get this dictation published in *Pravda*" [note 117, p. 823]; "No one learned of the dictation of December 24 or December 25 right away—because it likely did not happen then" [note 177, p. 825]; "Later, Trotsky himself would give reason to suspect his involvement in the dictation, which, according to him, 'rounds out and clarifies the proposal that Lenin made me in our last conversation.' According to Trotsky, Lenin 'was systematically preparing to deliver at the 12th congress a crushing blow at Stalin as personifying bureaucracy, the mutual shielding among officials, arbitrary rule and general rudeness.' Trotsky hilariously added that 'The idea of a "bloc of Lenin and Trotsky" against the apparatus-men and bureaucrats was at that time fully known only to Lenin and me.' The reason it was not 'known' to anyone else is that Trotsky imagined it" [note 187, p. 826].

Although Trotsky is Kotkin's most frequent target, Krupskaya is also accused: "Krupskaya would characterize Stalin's rudeness over the phone as extraordinary, but this is not corroborated by any other source" [488]; "Perhaps Krupskaya was deliberately trying to stage a memorable incident" [Ibid.]. "Perhaps Krupskaya, interpolating Lenin's intentions, concocted all three March letters. Perhaps she first mouthed the words to Lenin and he mouthed them back. Perhaps he mumbled versions of them himself. We shall likely never know" [491]. The one scenario that Kotkin will not consider is that Lenin dictated them coherently.

Kotkin leans, however, to a much wider conspiracy: "Lenin's alleged 'Notes' were dated December 30– 31, 1922... The existing evidence strongly points to a maneuver by Krupskaya, and the staff in Lenin's secretariat, to forge what they interpreted as Lenin's will. They knew he was exercised over the Georgian affair; indeed, they egged him on over it. Trotsky might also have been complicit by this point" [493-494].

Unfortunately for Kotkin, "the existing evidence" does not exist. Why, then, does he engage in such speculation and outright lying?

If one follows carefully the content of Lenin's last letters, articles and dictations, it would be impossible to conclude that Stalin is Lenin's true heir and most devoted pupil. But that is precisely what Kotkin is trying to prove throughout this whole volume. He would probably rather fall down dead than admit that Lenin and Trotsky collaborated ever more closely during Lenin's last months of political life.

Much to this reviewer's surprise, some of Lenin's most embittered critics have expressed their dissatisfaction with Kotkin's presentation of Lenin's last documents. None other than Richard Pipes quotes from Lenin's "Testament":

Stalin is too rude and this shortcoming, fully tolerable within our

midst and in our relations as Communists, becomes intolerable in the post of General Secretary. For this reason I suggest that the comrades consider how to transfer Stalin from this post and replace him with someone who in all other respects enjoys over Comrade Stalin only one advantage, namely greater patience, greater loyalty, greater courtesy and attentiveness to comrades, less capriciousness, etc. (endnote 22)

Pipes then continues:

This powerful denunciation of Stalin, first published in *The New York Times* in 1926 (translated by Max Eastman), had to wait thirty years before it became public knowledge in the Soviet Union, following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress. Subsequently it was included in the fifth edition of Lenin's *Collected Works*.

Given these facts, it comes as a considerable surprise to have Kotkin reject the Testament as very likely a fabrication. He refers to it as a document "attributed" to Lenin whose authenticity "has never been proven." Although Kotkin acknowledges that it could be authentic, he does not clearly accept it as such, as it has been by all other historians; as noted, it is included in Lenin's *Collected Works*. Kotkin points to the fact that no stenographic originals of the document exist. But he contradicts himself by citing Stalin's own references to the Testament and his admission, according to an account by Trotsky of a party meeting, that he was indeed "rude." Stalin, in whose interest it was to denounce the Testament as a forgery, never did so, as Kotkin himself admits: indeed, he referred to it as "the known letter of comrade Lenin."

Pipes refers to Stalin's verbal abuse of Krupskaya and then quotes from Lenin's article on the nationality question in which he called Stalin "a crude Great-Russian Derzhimorda" [thuggish police type]. Pipes concludes:

Kotkin does not cite this document either but simply dismisses it as "a blatant forgery," although it has been accepted by all historians of the period of whom I am aware as well as the editors of Lenin's *Collected Works*.

It is difficult to explain Kotkin's skepticism of Lenin's late anti-Stalin diatribes except perhaps by his unwillingness to concede that, supportive as Lenin had been of Stalin until his fatal illness, by the end of his life he had turned resolutely against him.

Pipes is certainly justified in struggling to explain Kotkin's approach. It is no exaggeration to say that Chapter 11, entitled "Remove Stalin," in which Kotkin violates basic historical standards in dealing with Lenin's "Testament," is enough to discredit the entire book. A few more words must be said about topics poorly covered in further chapters.

**The Left Opposition:** Kotkin shows no grasp of its formation, program or influence. There is no examination of the Declaration of the 46 in October 1923, which is usually treated as a founding document of the Left Opposition. Nor does Kotkin explore in any detail the New Course debate in November-December 1923. His presentation of the "Literary Discussion" (the furious attacks by Stalin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and others against Trotsky's "Lessons of October" in the fall of 1924) is cursory at best. There is no examination of the Platform of the United

Opposition (1927), or how its policies were a serious alternative to those of Stalin and his supporters. Inexplicably, Kotkin even falsifies the number of signatories to one of the main Opposition documents in 1927: "Trotsky and Zinoviev, along with more than four score supporters, sent a long document known as the Declaration of the 84 for the initial signatories (a number that would grow above 300) to the Central Committee, ... it was a full-throated anti-NEP, pro-revolution leftists manifesto. 'Declaration of the 84,' in Trotsky, *Challenge of the Left Opposition*, II, 224-39" [endnote 182, p. 848]. On page 226 of the source Kotkin cites, the editors note: "Later the number of signatories rose to five hundred, and still later to three thousand"; Kotkin thereby undercounts the signatories by a factor of ten, suggesting that the Opposition had many fewer supporters than they actually had.

Many pages would be required to address Kotkin's (mis)treatment of the revolutionary situation in Germany 1923, the British General Strike of 1926 and the Chinese Revolution of 1925-1927. Each of these colossal defeats of the working class strengthened the stranglehold of the Soviet bureaucracy and contributed to the organizational defeat of the United Opposition at the XVth Party Congress of 1927. Most leading oppositionists were expelled from the party, and from that point on, oppositional activities against Stalin's policies were subject to criminal sanctions. Trotsky would be exiled to Central Asia, many other leading oppositionists would be scattered to remote corners of the Soviet Union and Stalin's dictatorship over the party fully embodied a profound reaction against the very tenets of the October Revolution.

**Stalin's trip to Siberia in January 1928.** Kotkin presents some interesting details about Stalin's secret trip, but mainly to show how strong-willed Stalin was, even in the face of a looming catastrophe and loss of support among his closest cohorts. The Siberian trip set the stage for Stalin's complete forced collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union, the topic which will open the second volume of Kotkin's biography.

## Conclusion

Kotkin's book serves definite social forces in today's politically volatile world. His main goal is to identify the crimes of Stalinism with Marxism, an undertaking pursued by Richard Pipes, Robert Service, Jörg Baberowski and many others. Collectively, they want to ensure that anyone who is looking for an alternative to capitalism is turned away from the revolutionary traditions embodied in the October Revolution and defended by Lenin and Trotsky. In their minds, Marxism ineluctably leads to Stalinism, and the true alternative to Stalinism—Trotskyism—must be distorted and falsified beyond recognition.

In his own eagerness to refute Marxism, Kotkin comes perilously close to openly embracing fascism. His praise for Mussolini's regime in Italy is so effusive that he somewhat sheepishly adds: "None of this is meant to uphold Italian fascism in any way as a model, but merely to spotlight that nothing prevented the Communist dictatorship from embracing private capital—nothing, that is, except *idées fixes*" [725].

Kotkin reveals his own *idée fixe* in the book's concluding chapter, "Coda." Here his profound admiration of Stalin's will-power reaches absurd proportions. One senses that Kotkin set out to refute the Marxist approach to the role of the individual in history: he thereby produces a Nietzschean hymn to Stalin's voluntarism as he berates Carr for his overall assessment of Stalin. In 1958, Carr had written: "Stalin illustrates the thesis that circumstances make the man, not the man the circumstances" [Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, I., 192]. Kotkin's response today? "Utterly, eternally wrong. Stalin made history,

rearranging the entire socioeconomic landscape of one sixth of the earth. Right through mass rebellion, mass starvation, cannibalism, the destruction of the country's livestock, and unprecedented political destabilization, Stalin did not flinch" [740]. There is no hint of the social forces that supported Stalin as he carried out his policies. Classes simply disappear, and Stalin emerges as a superhuman figure, reshaping the global landscape as his will happens to dictate.

To the extent that he can, Kotkin blames Lenin for Stalin's actions: "Stalin intensified the insanity inherent in Leninism from conviction and personal characteristics, ensuring that the permanent state of war with the whole world led to a state of war with the country's majority population, and carrying the Leninist program to its full end goal of anti-capitalism" [737].

Trotsky, meanwhile, is simply dismissed: "Without Lenin, Trotsky never again demonstrated the leadership that he had in 1917 and during the civil war under Lenin's authority. On the very uneven playing field of the personal dictatorship that Stalin inherited by dint of his appointment as general secretary and Lenin's stroke, Trotsky was still capable of brilliant polemics, but not of building an ever-wider faction, dividing his enemies, subsuming his convictions to necessary tactical considerations. More than that, Trotsky had never been an indefatigable, nitty-gritty administrator or a strategist capable of ruthlessly opportunistic improvisation. Whatever the overlap between his and Stalin's core beliefs [!], Stalin's abilities and resolve were an order of magnitude greater" [737-738]. With these words, Kotkin demonstrates that he has no inkling of the principled politics guiding Trotsky's activity. Little does he know that "ruthlessly opportunistic improvisation" was not what made Trotsky one of the two main leaders of the October Revolution.

Lenin and Trotsky are thus the real targets of Kotkin's biography of Stalin. When considering their joint role in October 1917, Kotkin approvingly notes that "the Bolshevik putsch could have been prevented by a pair of bullets" [223]. With this first volume, Kotkin tries to do on the historical front what bullets failed to do in 1917.

As bad as this first volume of the Stalin biography is, it is safe to say that the second volume will be even worse. Having failed miserably in his treatment of 1878-1928, Kotkin will show that he is equally incapable of covering the complex issues of collectivization, famine, the Great Terror, the Stalin-Hitler Pact and the opening of World War II (1929-1941). And yet the shameless reviewers will probably shower as much praise on volume two as they do on volume one: these unwarranted accolades are a sharp expression of the decay of critical thought that is far too widespread in American academia and the mass media today.

#### Footnotes

[1] David R. Egan & Melinda A. Egan, *Joseph Stalin. An Annotated Bibliography of English Language Periodical Literature to 2005*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007. [return]

[2] When Trotsky was assassinated in August 1940 by Stalin's agent, Ramon Mercader, he had finished just seven of a projected twelve chapters of his biography of Stalin. Passages and notes for the remaining chapters were later assembled by Charles Malamuth for the English translation that was published by Harper Brothers in 1941. [return]

[3] Kotkin is an avowed opponent of Marxism, which he often reduces to a vulgar caricature. To get a sense of his views, see the works he recommended in 2009 in *Foreign Affairs*. [return]

[4] See, for example, the video of Kotkin speaking at NYU's Jordan Center in September 2014. [return]

[5] See David North, *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*, Mehring Books, 2013, pp. 114-121. [return]

[6] On March 4, 1926, Trotsky wrote to Bukharin about the use of anti-Semitism in attacking the Left Opposition. He proposed visiting a factory where such slander had been reported: "Let us take a trip to the cell together and check into the matter. I think that you and I—two members of

the Politburo—have after all a few things in common, enough to calmly and conscientiously verify: (1) whether it is possible that *in our party, in Moscow, in a workers' cell*, propaganda is being conducted with impunity which is vile and slanderous, on the one hand, and anti-Semitic, on the other; and (2) whether honest workers are afraid to question or verify or try to refute any stupidity, lest they be driven into the street with their families." [Leon Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition* (1926-27), NY: Pathfinder Press, 1980, p.46. See also Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 258-259]. Bukharin's response is unknown. [return]

[7] See Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, p. 60. [return]

[8] See Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970, pp. 455-460. See also Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1954, pp. 458-473. [return]

[9] Victor Danilov, "We are Starting to Learn about Trotsky," translated by Cathy Porter, in: *History Workshop*, Issue 29, Spring 1990, pp. 138-139. [return]

[10] For more on Trotsky's anticipation of NEP, see Richard B. Day, "Comment on the Origins of the NEP," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, No. 1-2 (Spring-Summer, 1977), pp. 60-67. [return]

[11] Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, v. 54, p. 314. [return]

[12] Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970, p. 467. [return]

[13] In 1991, Naumov dated the note October 2, 1922, in the article "1923 god" in *Kommunist*, 1991, No. 5, pp. 30-42. In a later collection, the editors dated the note between 14 and 18 July 1922. See V. I. Lenin. *Neizvestnye dokumenty, 1891-1922*, Moskva: ROSSPEN, 1999, p. 544. [return]

[14] The last sentence is from Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*. It can refer to murdered victims in the play, or be used colloquially to mean, "I am stunned." [return]

[15] Lenin, *Collected Works*, v. 45, p. 601. [return]

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 603. [return]

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 604. [return]

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 606. [return]

[19] Kotkin gives an incredible reading of Lenin's "Letter to the Congress" in which he warns of a split: "The dictation warned that 'these two qualities of the two outstanding leaders of the present Central Committee'— Stalin's incaution, Trotsky's self-assured political daftness— 'can inadvertently lead to a schism, and if our party does not take steps to avert this, the schism may come unexpectedly'" [500]. Anyone who reads Lenin's actual words will find no hint at "Trotsky's political daftness." Lenin actually states: "Comrade Trotsky, on the other hand, as his struggle against the C. C. on the question of the People's Commissariat for Communications has already proved, is distinguished not only by outstanding ability. He is personally perhaps the most capable man in the present C. C., but he has displayed excessive self-assurance and shown excessive preoccupation with the purely administrative side of the work" [See Lenin, "Letter to the Congress," *Collected Works*, v. 36, p. 594-595]. [return]

[20] Valentin Sakharov, *Na rasput'e* [At the Crossroads], M: Akva-Term, 2012, p. 7. [return]

[21] In a new biography of Stalin (which will soon appear in English), the respected Russian historian Oleg Khlevniuk writes: "Until recently, the authenticity of the anti-Stalinist dictations and activities of Lenin, which logically form a general picture, never raised any doubts. Only in recent years have attempts been made in Russia to declare Lenin's assessments a falsification [a footnote refers to Sakharov's 2003 book on Lenin's testament]. Despite a pseudo-scientific presentation and references to archives, these attempts are not genuinely scientific. As a result, everything has been reduced to an absurd conspiratorial version:

the anti-Stalinist dictations were fabricated and then slipped into Lenin's archive by Trotsky's supporters!" (Oleg Khlevniuk, *Stalin. Zhizn' odnogo vozhdia* [Stalin. Life of One Leader], Moskva, AST, 2015, p. 112).[return]

[22] Richard Pipes, "The Cleverness of Joseph Stalin," *New York Review of Books*, November 20, 2014.[return]



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