



*Stalin's War: A New History of World War II* by Sean McMeekin.

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German-centered literature on World War II that identifies Adolf Hitler as the villain who gives the struggle meaning has enjoyed a wide audience. Historian Sean McMeekin (Bard College) does not share such enthusiasm. In his polemical new book, *Stalin's War*, he contends that a correct understanding of World War II depends on grasping that the ambitious, astute, and ruthless Joseph Stalin, more than anyone else, put his imprint on this global conflict. Does he make his case?

*Stalin's War* is a well researched, clearly written, and massive tome. It comprises six sections. Part I, "Before the Storm," summarizes the main currents of Soviet foreign policy from 1917 to 1938. That is, from (a) the founding of the Comintern with its hostility toward the capitalist West and hope that a war would weaken its enemies and leave them ripe for revolution, to (b) the creation of the Popular Front and the quest—a sham, according to McMeekin—for collective security against fascist aggression.

Part II, "Huge and Hateful," tells the story of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939—a "Gangster Pact" (89) that led to the annexation and Sovietizing of eastern Poland, the Baltic states, and parts of Romania. It ended with a breakdown of relations between Nazi Germany and the USSR, leaving the two countries with a long common border and conflicts over their respective spheres of influence in Finland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey.

Part III, "Preparing for Armageddon," centers on the pivotal year 1941, which witnessed the fall of Yugoslavia, the signing of a neutrality pact by Japan and the USSR, the Germans' military preparations for, and invasion of the Soviet Union in June, the evacuation of Soviet industry eastward, and the beginning of the battle for Moscow.

Part IV, "Capitalist Lifeline," stresses the "substantial contribution" (384) of the United States to the Soviet war effort, which made possible the Red Army's counterattack (Dec. 1941) and victory at Stalingrad (Feb. 1943). None of this, however, kept the USSR from conducting industrial espionage in the USA "on a massive scale" (396) nor an ungrateful Stalin from complaining about the slow influx of Lend-Lease supplies or the delayed opening of a new front.

Part V, "Second Front," shifts to the diplomacy of the war years, as the author makes yet another bold statement. In order "to please Stalin" (441), Pres. Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill made two key mistakes: first, by insisting on the unconditional surrender of Germany (Jan. 1943), they gave German soldiers "white-hot motivation to fight harder" (450) and so prolong the war in Europe. Second, by supporting without quid pro quo the Soviet line on Katyn, where thousands of Polish officers and intelligentsia had been shot in April-May 1940 on Stalin's orders, Churchill and Roosevelt "missed a golden opportunity to seize control of the war and shape the postwar years" (450). But it is too simplistic, even erroneous, to reproach Stalin for having "had one goal, and one goal only: serving the interests of the Soviet Union" (455). Is it fair to expect the leader of the country that suffered far the heaviest losses to have behaved differently?

Part VI, “Plunder,” concerns the Anglo-Americans’ further concessions to Stalin at the Moscow Conference (Oct. 1944) and at Yalta (Feb. 1945). It also describes the victorious Red Army’s destruction of Eastern Europe on its way to Berlin.

In a dogmatic epilogue, McMeekin concludes that “the most lasting consequence of Stalin’s victories in 1945 was the impetus they had given to Communist expansion in Asia” (652). This tragedy was made possible by the active presence of Soviet agents in the British and American governments and bureaucracies, as well as by the complicity and naïvety of Henry Morgenthau, the US Secretary of the Treasury, and Harry Hopkins, a key advisor to President Roosevelt.

McMeekin’s revisionist thesis, which foregrounds the Soviet leader as the sole victor of the war and reveals the author’s relentless anti-communism, is fundamentally flawed on at least two counts. In the first place, he exaggerates Stalin’s influence on the choices, both military and political, made by Japanese leaders in the lead-up to Pearl Harbor. Secondly, and more importantly—World War II was nobody’s war exclusively, neither Hitler’s nor Stalin’s. Indeed, by definition, a “world” war can only be everyone’s war—a single tree, even a big one, does not a forest make. Finally, the book’s subtitle is problematic. As Richard Overy rightly argues in his most recent book,<sup>i</sup> the story of the Second World War begins with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (Sept. 1931), not with the invasion of the USSR by the Wehrmacht and German allies in June 1941. To argue otherwise is to distort the realities of that global conflict.

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i. Vix., *Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931–1945* (NY: Viking, 2022).