

Stalin's War, Culture Wars

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Stalin's War. A New History of the Second World War

By Sean McMeekin

Allen Lane

Published 8 April 2021

832 pp. Illustrated. £35.00

Criticism of the British for living in a Second World War past are frequent. Sean McMeekin, Professor of History at Bard College and a talented scholar of the First World War, takes an alternative view by arguing that we generally are living in the wrong war. Drawing on an impressive array of international archives, notably Russian and Polish, but also American, British, Bulgarian, French and German, McMeekin, a Norman Stone pupil, directs attention to Soviet activity. This, however, does not arise from some attempt to praise the Soviet Union as an ally against Germany but, instead, from a determination to present an equivalence between the two in aggression, expansionism, brutality and cynicism. McMeekin does not do this in order to exonerate Germany but rather to throw light on both by means of comparison. In some respects, for example the treatment of their own soldiers, this is very much to the detriment of the Soviets.

McMeekin's scan comprehends the Western Allies, notably Britain and the United States. Churchill comes in for criticism, but Roosevelt is held up as the arch-appeaser of the Soviet Union with Churchill, by comparison, emerging with considerably more credit. Truman is praised for thwarting the Soviet wish to occupy Hokkaido and it is suggested that Roosevelt would have permitted this.

There is an emphasis on the value of Anglo-American military aid to the Soviet Union and a harsh view of a postwar settlement that left so many slaves in postwar Communist regimes. Thus, the Americans are presented as fighting a war 'to make much of Europe and Asia safe for Communism.' 'Stalinophilia' in Washington and London in 1941-5 is in part attributed to Soviet agents of influence, not least in drafting the Morgenthau Plan and weakening Chiang Kai-shek. The former is seen as serving Stalin's purposes by stiffening the German resistance to Britain and the United States. Soviet agents in the BBC also come into the frame.

The book is certainly pertinent due to the extent to which modern cultural wars draw on historicised identities and therefore historical controversies. Indeed, the Cold War is in a sense still with us in these culture wars, a Cold War that began in 1917 and that puts for example Vladimir Putin and Jeremy Corbyn on the same side. McMeekin's account would provide tough reading for anybody endorsing the *Guardian's* view of history, including the major historian I heard argue that Stalin was

better than Hitler because he wished to kill social categories not ethnic ones. So all of you would have been for the chop; and, as Stalin showed with the Poles, he was no feeble racist himself.

I have doubts about this impressive, cogent and well-written book on three heads. First, I dislike the use of 150 pages for Abbreviations, Bibliography, Notes and Index. I would have preferred 150 pages more of text, and these others offered free online. The notes are impressive but they occupy too much of the book. Secondly, the book is less original than is suggested. The essential arguments can be found elsewhere. McMeekin brings them together in a helpful and vigorous fashion. Moreover, his account brings together conflict, economies, high politics, ideology, intelligence operations, and brutality. Claims, such as ‘The roseate glow of “the Good War” has saved its victorious statesmen from the scrutiny applied to their World War counterparts’ reflect a staggering failure to engage with the weight of available literature.

Thirdly, I fear that McMeekin is a little inclined to go for argument by assertion. He underrates the problems faced by the British and French had they understood that ‘the time to confront Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe was in 1939-1940,’ or realised that they should have liberated ‘the Balkans and the death camps of Eastern Europe themselves.’ Strategic geography is not apparently McMeekin’s forte. He is one for moving units round the board as if in Risk. It can make for better prose than insight.

McMeekin also very much emphasises Soviet success prior to the war, during it, and in the peace settlement and aftermath, Stalin did expand the Soviet empire greatly. The other Allied powers might appear as losers which had to spend lives and resources to maintain at least elements of the status quo before the war. While very much the case of Britain, France and China, this, however, was not the case with the United States. It did not represent nor really support the status quo. Instead, the United States transformed the situation in Europe and East Asia by becoming a power in both, which matched the Soviet increase in range in both. Added to this, the United States, as the world’s only nuclear power in 1945, possessed the clear strategic advantage of being alone at the cutting-edge of military technology, and thus having both a known and an unknowable capability advantage. The Americans by 1945 were also the world’s leading naval power, and had an unrivalled amphibious strength. With Britain, America had the only viable long-range bomber force. The Soviets had developed none of these capabilities.

Indeed, while the Soviets did best at benefiting from the collapse of Germany and its East European allies, it had to share with the Americans the benefit from the collapse of Japan. Initially, this collapse was very much to the advantage of the Americans. In essence, the Soviet Union got southern Sakhalin, the Kuriles, and the potential offered by Manchuria and North Korea; as well as clear dominance over Mongolia. In contrast, the United States gained control of Japan and its Pacific possessions, and its allies were able in 1945 to establish themselves in China (bar Manchuria), South

Korea, and their former colonies, albeit with a degree of precariousness. This precariousness, indeed, translated into the revival of the Chinese Civil War (1946-9), which ended in a Communist victory, as well as the developing crises of the British, French and Dutch empires in Asia. From the latter, the Communists were to benefit, but the Americans even more. How far wartime strategy was dependant on these postwar developments is open to debate, not least for Stalin.

So, a worthy contribution that deserves attention but that needs to be handled with some caution.

(1029 words)

Jeremy Black's books include *World War Two. A Military History*, *Rethinking World War Two*, *A History of the Second World War in 100 Maps* and *Strategy and the Second World War*.