Book Reviews


**Ionuț Mircea Marcu**

Stephen Kotkin is one of the few historians who are well known even outside academia. And for good reasons, indeed. His contributions, especially *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* or *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*, generated important debates on the Soviet regime and are regarded as very influential in promoting a new paradigm for Soviet studies: post-revisionism. The main paradigm-shift (using Thomas Kuhn’s concept) made was to include into historical inquire all the various ways in which individuals adapted to the political regime, as Kotkin himself defined socialism not only as a political arrangement of institutions and practices, but as an experience, lived differently by different actors, in various contexts.

His most recent academic project is a biography of Stalin in three volumes. His choice of Stalin for this research is easy to understand, given

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the fact that Kotkin`s most important contributions have been about Stalinism. One could argue that too many biographies of Stalin have been written. This is somehow true, but a book about Stalin, in the way Kotkin intends to do it is still very compelling. The first book in this trilogy is limited, chronologically, to the years 1878 – 1928, so it covers topics such as: the family and childhood of Stalin, the Bolshevik Revolution, the relationship with Lenin and the struggle for power.

Writing a biography is no easy task for any historian. The biographical genre has been, until recently, considered not a scientific and systematic way of doing historical research. The problem of the biography as a historical narrative is that it is centered around one person (or a group of people, in the case of collective biography) and events are explained only from that point of view. As Pierre Bourdieu would say: the biography is an illusion. Still, historians have always written biographies one way or another. In Antiquity, historians used comparative biography (see the examples of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* or Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars*) for educational purposes. In the Middle Ages, court historians wrote biographies of kings and emperors in order to create a certain image about those political figures. The first major change came with Ranke and his school (still, focusing almost exclusively on politics), but the main argument against biography as a historical method was made in the 20th century. The Annales School proposed a different way of doing history: one that is concerned more with long-term economic, social and cultural developments, and less with political
leaders. If, as the members of the Annales School believed, what actually matters in history are those long-term phenomena, the biography of any individual is too limited (in time and scope) to be of any use. For this reason, even though historians wrote books about lives of individuals (from political leaders to ordinary people), the biography as a method was considered somehow a lesser way of doing history. Recently, this approach is more and more contested.

Without any doubt, the book at hand is indeed impressively well-researched. The author managed to achieve an amazingly deep understanding not only of Stalin`s life, but of the entire history of the 20th century. Using documents and literature gathered during his entire career, Kotkin does debate with many authors who have previously wrote about Stalinism and his punctual contributions are very numerous.

For this reasons, Kotkin`s main difficulty, I would say, is a methodological one: how to apply the biographical perspective in such a way that is systematically providing historical knowledge. I would argue that the most important contribution of this book is related more to the methodology used. What I am trying to propose is to read Kotkin`s book about Stalin using a different perspective, one that is more concerned with the broader conceptual issue: how can a historian use a biographical approach in order to better understand complex historical developments? Because of this, apart from being a very well-documented story about Stalin and his life, the first book in this trilogy is, I would say, an attempt by the author to propose a new way of writing a biography.
While reading the book, the impression is that Kotkin changes his point of view quite often. In the first chapters, he presents the history of Russia during the first years of Stalin’s life and in some places he seems to forget completely about his main character. The author suitably explains the situation of the Russian Empire at the end of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th century, but his historical narrative is not centered on Stalin and his experience. The second part of the book changes the focus: Kotkin explains in detail Lenin’s role and the relation(s) between three main-characters: Lenin, Trotki and Stalin. Only in the last part of the book, Stalin becomes the main character of the story and everything revolves around him.

I believe that Kotkin uses these different lenses for a reason, one that is linked to the way he understands the role of biography. I would say that the author is using, in different parts of the book, different methods of biographical narrative. His long, sometimes too long, digressions about Russian history could be explained by the fact that he is writing, in those parts, a biography of Russia, in which Stalin is only a small actor (a part of a large collective). In the second part, the author uses comparative biography (mainly between Lenin, Trotki and Stalin), explicitly or implicitly. Sometimes he does it in a very subtle way, and sometimes he actually compares two characters in order to make his point. The last part of the book, centred around Stalin, is much closer to the classic way of writing a biography.
For Kotkin, the biography (as a method of historical research) is not something rigid or inflexible. By using all these different approaches to the genre, he is trying to overcome all the inherent methodological shortcomings or limits. His definition and usage of biography makes the reader believe that, actually, the life of Stalin is only a narrative device, used in order to explain broader, more complex issues about the history of Russia and, then, the Soviet Union. Because of this, it makes sense that Kotkin creates a transition, from a general perspective on Russia, in the first chapters, to a closer perspective, focused more on Stalin`s point of view. This process is linked to the rise of the main character himself. In the beginning, Stalin is not yet able to influence events, but by the end of the book he becomes more and more powerful. He turns from someone who is made by circumstances into someone who makes circumstances.

But the bigger issue is much more complex. As I have already said, historians have long debated about what matters: long-term evolutions or individuals. At the end of the book, Kotkin tries to answer these difficult questions: Who created who? Was Stalin simply a result of context or did he created the context? The fact that he references E. H. Carr is the key to understand the author`s point of view:

*If Stalin had died, the likelihood of forced wholesale collectivization—the only kind—would have been near zero, and the likelihood that the Soviet regime would have been transformed into something else or fallen apart would have been high. “More than almost any other great man in history,” wrote the historian E. H. Carr, “Stalin illustrates the thesis that circumstances make the man, not the man the circumstances.” 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. Feints in the form of tactical retreats notwithstanding, he would keep going even when told to his face by officials in the inner regime that a catastrophe was unfolding—full speed ahead to socialism. This required extraordinary maneuvering, browbeating, and violence on his part. It also required deep conviction that it had to be done. Stalin was uncommonly skillful in building an awesome personal dictatorship, but also a bungler, getting fascism wrong, stumbling in foreign policy. But he had will. He went to Siberia in January 1928 and did not look back. History, for better and for worse, is made by those who never give up.¹

E. H. Carr argued, using the example of Stalin, that long-term structures are more important than individuals. Kotkin, on the other hand, believes that Stalin is one of the very few historical figures who changed the development of events so much, that he could be regarded as more than simply a consequence of a set of phenomena. Still, it would be wrong to assume that Kotkin has a simplistic approach to this problem (I argued that he uses more than one perspective, which of course is far from a simple approach). Actually, in different parts of the book, he points out how close Stalin (or Russia) was to moving in a very different direction that he / it did.

This seems to be a contradiction. If Stalin, as Kotkin argues, was the one who made history (not someone who was made by history) then why highlight all those moments which show how close his life was to turning out very differently? I believe this is not a contradiction, but a paradox. There are many reasons why the author used Paradoxes of Power as a title for this

volume. One of those, I believe, is because any biography is full of paradoxes, as there is not any single univocal explanation for historical events.

Stephen Kotkin`s *Stalin. Volume I. Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* is not only a very important contribution on the life of Joseph Stalin or on Russia / the Soviet Union in the 20th century. This volume is a very important argument in favour of biography as a historical method, not in a way that does assume there is a red line that can explain everything, but by including the paradoxical nature of any life. The second volume of the trilogy (*Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941*), published on 31st October 2017, deals with many difficult questions. Judging by the first book, the answers provided by Kotkin should be taken into consideration.