

# BOOKS

## Stalin's Other War: Soviet Grand Strategy, 1939–1941

by Albert L. Weeks

Rowman & Littlefield • 2002 • 201 pages  
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Reviewed by Richard M. Ebeling

For most of the period since the end of World War II the general interpretation about the role of the Soviet Union in the events leading up to the beginning of the war in 1939 ran something like the following:

In the 1930s Great Britain and France had failed to show decisiveness in standing up to the growing threat from Hitler's Germany. Stalin, in the Soviet Union, had a clearer understanding of this threat and showed greater resolve to resist fascism's increasing power. He ended the Soviet Union's aggressive propaganda against the West, and attempted to form a "popular front" with other anti-fascist nations and groups in Europe on the basis of "collective security."

Britain's and France's appeasement policies, which allowed Hitler to occupy Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938 and early 1939, made Stalin realize that to save the Soviet Union from having to possibly face Nazi aggression alone without support from the Western powers, he had to "buy time" to build up Soviet military defenses. Thus, he chose to enter into a nonaggression pact with Hitler in August of 1939. He agreed in a secret protocol of that pact to divide up Poland with Nazi Germany in the event of war breaking out, so as to widen the buffer zone separating Nazi military power from the Soviet heartland. Stalin's fears were proven right when Hitler broke the pact in June of 1941 and invaded the USSR.

It may have been unsavory and unfortunate for the Poles, who had their nation carved up by the two totalitarian giants in September 1939; or for the Finns, who were invaded by the Red Army and lost border territory to the Soviet Union in the winter of 1939-1940; or

for the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which were annexed by Stalin in June 1940; or for the residents of the Romanian provinces of Bessarabia and Bukovia, which were also occupied by Stalin's forces in June 1940. But these lands provided "breathing space" for the Soviet Union to peacefully prepare for the inevitable war and do its part, after it was invaded, to destroy the Nazi threat to humanity.

This interpretation has been increasingly challenged over the last two decades. Ernst Topitsch's *Stalin's War* (1987), Viktor Suvorov's *Icebreaker* (1990), and Heinz Magenheimer's *Hitler's War* (1998), for example, all argue that Stalin's purpose was not to protect the Soviet Union from an early attack. Instead, Stalin's strategy was to intentionally create the conditions for a war to more easily break out between Nazi Germany and the Western powers. Such a war would weaken the "capitalist nations" and produce the conditions for communist revolution throughout Europe at the point of Soviet bayonets and tanks.

These authors also have argued that Stalin was planning an aggressive war against Nazi Germany, with the only problem being that Hitler attacked the Soviet Union before Stalin could break the nonaggression pact and invade Germany. Magenheimer even reproduced maps from the Soviet archives showing the planned directions of attack into the German heartland by Soviet military units. The differences of opinion among these writers have been about the date for Stalin's aggressive war on Germany. Was it to have been in the summer of 1941 or the spring of 1942?

The latest work on this theme is Albert Weeks's *Stalin's Other War*. Weeks has drawn on the latest findings in the formerly secret Soviet archives to carefully explain and contrast these two historical interpretations of Stalin's policies between 1939 and 1941. But it is clear that he is impressed by the documentation that substantiates the case for seeing Stalin as an active and aggressive force for bringing about the start of the Second World War.

Lenin believed that World War I served as

the catalyst for weakening the “capitalist nations.” Out of their war with each other came the opportunity for socialist revolution and the overthrow of the property-owning “exploiters.” The proof of this, according to Lenin, was shown by the success of his Bolsheviks coming to power in Russia in 1917 and maintaining their control over one-sixth of the landmass of the world when the war was over.

Stalin accepted Lenin’s view and believed that another equally exhausting new world war among those capitalist nations would enable the socialist revolution to be extended all the way across the European continent. In a secret speech before Communist Party members in January 1925, Stalin said that the Soviet Union would not be able to stay out of a future war; but when action was taken by the USSR it should be at the end of the conflict to tip the scales toward an outcome favorable for world revolution.

Weeks argues that Stalin’s appeal for “collective security” in the 1930s was not to defeat fascism, but to prevent Britain and France from aligning with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union. In the typical Marxist paranoia of class conspiracy and conflict, the trick, in Stalin’s mind, was to prevent all the capitalist countries from ganging up on the homeland of socialism in Soviet Russia.

Weeks includes as an appendix to his book a translation of a previously secret speech that Stalin delivered on August 19, 1939, four days before the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact was signed in Moscow on August 23. Stalin explained that peace prevented the spread of communism; war, on the other hand, provided the destruction and destabilization that was the entrée to revolution.

Comrades! It is in the interest of the USSR, the Land of the Toilers, that war breaks out between the Reich and the capitalist Anglo-French bloc. Everything must be done so that the war lasts as long as possible in order that both sides become exhausted. Namely for this reason we must agree to the pact proposed

by Germany, and use it so that once this war is declared, it will last for a maximum amount of time.

If the Nazis were defeated, Stalin argued, “the sovietization of Germany follows inevitably and a Communist government will be established.” And if the war had weakened the Western allies enough, “This will likewise ensure the sovietization of France.”

If the Nazis were to win at the end of a long war they would be exhausted and have to rule over a large area, which would pre-occupy them from attacking the Soviet Union; and “these peoples who fell under the ‘protection’ of a victorious Germany would become our allies. We would have a large arena in which to develop the world revolution.” But regardless of the eventual victor, the Communist Parties in all these countries needed to keep up their propaganda and subversion so the groundwork would have been prepared for that revolution when the time came.

Thus, in Stalin’s mind, Hitler’s drive for a Europe dominated by Nazi Germany was in fact a tool for him to use for advancing the global cause of communism. By freeing Hitler of the fear of a two-front war, Nazi Germany would invade Poland, the British and French might then declare war on Germany, and a prolonged war in central and western Europe would drain the capitalist nations, while leaving the Soviet Union neutral in the world conflict. This would enable Stalin to continue to build up Soviet military power, enter the war at a time of his own choosing, and bring communism to Europe through use of the Red Army.

But the collapse of France in June 1940 changed the configuration of forces and the likely length of the war. Hitler attempted to draw Stalin actively into the Axis alliance against the British Empire in November 1940; when that failed because Stalin’s price for participation seemed too high, Hitler ordered the plans to be set in motion for the invasion of the USSR in the spring of 1941.

From the documents that have started to become available in Moscow, Weeks

explains, it is evident that Stalin now shifted to a more aggressive military strategy against Nazi Germany. A huge military buildup of Soviet forces along the border with Germany (in what had been Poland) was set in motion. But the controversy has been about whether this buildup was for defensive or offensive purposes.

The documents show that no plan or preparations were organized for the construction of defense positions. The deployment and order of battle were virtually all consistent with an offensive strategy, not the repulse of an anticipated attack. The configuration of these forces explains why the Germans faced no serious defense positions when they invaded, and why they were able to initially capture so many Soviet soldiers and advance so rapidly into Soviet territory—in the first six months of the German invasion seven million Red Army soldiers were either captured or killed, and 500,000 square miles of Soviet territory were occupied.

Furthermore, there has come to light the full text of a Soviet General Staff document from May 15, 1941, that explicitly presents the plan to “Preempt the enemy by deploying against and attacking the German Army at the very moment when he has reached the deployment stage but is still not able to organize its forces into a front or coordinate all his forces.”

Was this just a plan prepared by the Soviet military, or was this reflective of Stalin’s intentions? Ten days earlier, on May 5, Stalin spoke at a reception for recent graduates of Red Army officer schools, and declared that the time for mere defense was over now that the Soviet military had been reconstructed and was ready for battle. “Now is the time to go from defense to offense.”

It is fairly clear, now, that Stalin, having helped to start the Second World War through his pact with Hitler, was readying to attack Germany and begin the process of sovietizing the European continent. Hitler, guided by his own aggressive ambitions, merely beat him to the punch by striking first. But even out of the actual turn of events, Stalin succeeded in imposing communism on half of Europe for almost half a century.

Stalin, however, was not pleased with even this outcome. At the Potsdam Conference, after the defeat of Germany, President Truman went up to Stalin and congratulated him on the Soviet Army’s conquest of Berlin. Stalin glumly replied that the Russian Army under Czar Alexander I had reached Paris in the war against Napoleon. □

*Richard Ebeling is president of the Foundation for Economic Education.*

## Heaven on Earth: The Rise and Fall of Socialism

by Joshua Muravchik

Encounter Books • 2002 • 417 pages • \$27.95.

*Reviewed by Tyler Cowen*

**T**he history of socialism is a sad, bitter, and bloody story. Arguably it is mankind’s greatest tragedy of all time. Joshua Muravchik notes that regimes calling themselves socialist have murdered over 100 million people since 1917. Nor have those same regimes brought economic prosperity or equality of opportunity, as the rhetoric of socialism invariably promises.

Muravchik is well positioned to present such a history of socialism. He grew up in a socialist family where socialism was treated as a religious faith, and he was once national chairman of the Young People’s Socialist League. He is now a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a very learned man.

The book starts with the role of Babeuf in the French Revolution, a key advocate for socialism. We then hear about Robert Owen’s experimental socialist colony in New Harmony, about Friedrich Engels, Lenin, Mussolini, and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania. The final section of the book deals with the socialist collapse, covering American labor leaders, Deng and Gorbachev, and the fall of social democracy as an ideal. Each chapter is clear, to the point, and full of facts. The author focuses on portraits of thinkers who have been instrumental in

propagating the socialist philosophy and its corresponding economic institutions. Those portraits are simultaneously enlightening and depressing.

The book nonetheless reads as a disappointment overall. It is difficult to find a central thesis about why socialism was ever so appealing, or why it was subsequently given up by so many. We are told repeatedly that socialism was a utopian vision that sought to remake the world. True, but why would such an obviously flawed idea enjoy such a long and broad reign? What is the underlying human imperfection behind the attraction to socialism? Given the author's background, it is odd how little psychological insight the book conveys. Instead we get a tightly controlled narrative, fine as far as it goes but never gripping or compelling.

The choice of subject matter is problematic as well. Why start with Babeuf and the French Revolution? It is unlikely that the true root of the socialist ideal lies with this thinker, despite the author's claim that the French Revolution was the "manger in which socialism was born." Babeuf is instead one in a long line of mistaken visionaries, drawing his ideas from numerous longstanding elements of the Western tradition, including Christianity. In any case, surely socialism is but one example of a broader, more common kind of error, and presumably an error that still lies with us.

There is little else in this book to criticize, other than its failure to take more chances. The book would have been better, I believe, if the author had tried to establish insightful psychological portraits, going far beneath the surface, of leading socialist thinkers. Such portraits would help the reader understand how such smart people could have adhered to such vicious fallacies even in the face of strong intellectual criticism and evidence of their failure in practice. Furthermore, the different portraits could have been done so as to draw out elements of commonality or contrast, and relate a core thesis to the social-science literature on belief, cognition, psychology, or economics.

My favorite hypothesis for the popularity of socialism (and numerous other ideologies)

cites the capacity of human beings to deceive themselves, considering only information that supports their point of view. This self-deception faculty is rampant in human nature and human history. Still, we would like to have some indication of when the tendency for self-deception gets turned on to such a strong extent, and how it becomes socially validated and extended. On this point much work remains to be done.

In the meantime, it is always useful to have a book that reminds us of the socialist tragedy of the twentieth century. And for those of us who do not know the relevant history, Muravchik offers a highly readable and trustworthy source on numerous personalities and events associated with that tragedy. But *Heaven on Earth* does not offer what I buy books for, namely, the "A-HA!" feeling of some new insight or perspective. □

*Tyler Cowen is a professor of economics at George Mason University and a contributor to [www.volokh.com](http://www.volokh.com) and [www.marginalrevolution.com](http://www.marginalrevolution.com). His most recent book is *Creative Destruction*.*

## Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science

by Charles Wheelan

W. W. Norton • 2002 • 288 pages •  
\$25.95 hardcover; \$15.95 paperback

*Reviewed by E. Frank Stephenson*

Charles Wheelan's goal in writing *Naked Economics* is to introduce people who might otherwise have avoided economics texts and courses larded with graphs and equations to "a subject that is provocative, powerful, and highly relevant to almost every aspect of our lives." Wheelan largely achieves his commendable goal, for *Naked Economics* is a nifty primer that does indeed "walk through some of the most powerful concepts in economics while simplifying the building blocks or skipping them entirely."

Not surprisingly, since the author's day job is writing for *The Economist*, the chapter on international trade is one of the

book's strongest. He begins the chapter by asking readers to imagine there is an invention that, in rich and poor countries alike, is capable of turning corn into stereo equipment, soybeans into cars, or Windows software into fine French wines. Wheelan then reveals that such an invention already exists. It's trade. From that beginning, he proceeds to explain that trade makes us richer by allowing greater specialization in production, is mutually beneficial because it is based on voluntary exchange, and helps consumers by lowering the prices they pay for both imported and domestic goods. Not yet finished extolling the virtues of international trade, Wheelan turns to slaying the myths of "sweatshop labor" and a trade-fostered environmental "race to the bottom."

Wheelan's chapter titled "The Power of Markets" is another of his better ones. He uses the question "Who feeds Paris?" as a springboard for explaining how markets are "a powerful force for making our lives better," how they use "prices to allocate scarce resources," how "markets are self-correcting," and how "every market transaction makes all parties better off." And readers of this magazine will be reminded of F. A. Hayek and Leonard Read when the author writes that "Prices are like giant neon billboards that flash important information." The only significant weakness of this chapter is Wheelan's nearly exclusive focus on market outcomes; the chapter could have been strengthened by the inclusion of more discussion about the mechanics of how markets work.

Although he does not credit it by name, Wheelan also provides a nice introduction to the public-choice school of economics. In the chapter "The Power of Organized Interests," he takes on pork-barrel spending and logrolling, and reveals how small interests such as mohair farmers and ethanol producers can effectively wrangle beneficial legislation out of the political process. The chapter also introduces the concept of rent-seeking and explains how regulations such as occupational licensing can become powerful tools for self-interested individuals to extract rewards that they would be unable to

obtain in the marketplace.

There's much else to like about *Naked Economics*. Wheelan debunks the notion that "overpopulation" hinders economic growth and skewers the fixed-number-of-jobs fallacy underlying France's 35-hour workweek. He recognizes the importance of property rights and institutions. He discusses inflation as a tax on money holdings and the government's ability to use monetary policy for political purposes (the political business cycle). And Wheelan correctly labels Social Security "one big pyramid scheme," even though his discussion focuses more on demographic issues than on liberty.

Unfortunately, as Burton Malkiel notes in his foreword, *Naked Economics* is "well balanced." Thus while one does get nice treatments of markets, trade, and public choice, one must also endure Wheelan's views on SUVs, suburban sprawl, fast food, global warming, and trade-induced "cultural homogenization." Readers sharing this magazine's love of freedom should expect to utter an occasional groan. On the topics of externalities and macroeconomic policy in particular, Wheelan envisions a large and active role for government.

A minor complaint is also in order. Readers who believe not all economic research is mathematical gibberish will be pleased that *Naked Economics* is sprinkled with examples of economists' relevance. However, the citations are somewhat erratic, and there are some noteworthy omissions (including James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock's pioneering research in public choice, and Adam Smith in the chapter on markets; the trade chapter contains too much Paul Krugman and too little David Ricardo).

Early in the book, Wheelan writes, "Life is about trade-offs, and so is economics." Indeed, so is *Naked Economics*. Although the reader must endure occasional outbursts of statism, the trade-off is well worth it, for Charles Wheelan has written a lively introduction to the sexiest discipline known to mankind, economics. □

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*Frank Stephenson (efstephenson@berry.edu) is an associate professor of economics at Berry College in Rome, Georgia.*