

**Geoffrey Roberts**, *Stalin's Library. A Dictator and His Books*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2022, 260 p.

Stalin's interest in reading books, the respect and care he offered them can be remarked in one event from the ruler's family life. When his two sons were studying from an old History textbook and the wind blew some of the fragile pages away, their father was supposed to have told them to go and get them back. Later he also supposedly taught them how to repair the volume, fixing its book spine. Eventually, after the book was whole again, Stalin told them: 'You did good. Now you know how to treat books'<sup>10</sup>.

The book *Stalin's Library. A Dictator and His Books*, written by Geoffrey Roberts, was published for the first time in the year of 2022 at Yale University Press. The author is a British historian and Professor at College Cork University. He is specialized in the history of the Soviet Union and some of his works include *Stalin's General: The life of Georgy Zhukov* (2012) or *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War* (1995). Some of his ideas come as innovative, but are also difficult to digest for the scientific community and the public. For example, he forwarded the idea that the Soviet Union and Stalin represented an important part in the process of saving liberal democracy together with the communist system, from the danger of Nazism. Also, sentencing the terror and the brutality of the system, Roberts declared that Moscow was responsible for some of the most important achievements of humanity too.

*Stalin's Library. A Dictator and His Books* is comprised of 260 pages and it is divided in four main chapters, found between an introduction and a chapter that contains the author's conclusions. The core of the work concentrates on the so-called *Pometki*, which were the annotations done by Stalin himself on numerous non-fiction books, in which he lets us see his views, be it positive or negative. A similar approach was taken by Ambrus Miskolczy in 2003 with his work *Hitler's Library*, where he tries to enter the Fuhrer's mind through his books.

Roberts' book in particular comes as a successor to other research done by both himself and other historians, which create a complex biography of the former totalitarian leader. Such a numerous amount of books that recount Stalin's life exist that Roberts's account on the subject might seem superfluous. Among other papers we especially mention Stephen Kotkin's two published volumes that together achieve a biography of Stalin from his birth to the year of 1941. The last chapter of

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his life is supposed to be covered by a third and final volume. *Stalin: Volume I: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928* (2014) and *Stalin: Volume II: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941* (2017) come as one of the most profound analyses of Stalin's life we have so far. We can also look at Oleg V. Khlevniuk's book *Stalin. New Biography of a Dictator* (2015) in which the author tries to fight any pseudo-scientific theories that defend the former dictator. An account of the controversies regarding Stalin is minutely described in *Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism. Complexities, Contradictions and Controversies*, edited by James Ryan and Susan Grant (2021). In them we can see a glimpse of what Roberts is trying to show us through his own book, that of another face of the dictator – that of the avid reader, the rigid intellectual who comes as a mirror-image of what the general perception of the public deems Stalin to be.

The author has started his research in the soviet Soviet archives since 1996, but only 2010 was the moment when his passion for the remainings of Stalin's library came to be born. He was already familiar with Stalin's style of annotating thanks to his previous research.

The scientific aspects of Roberts's methodology is announced right from the introduction. Here he manifests his intention of exploring both the intellectual life of the dictator and his biography as they can be seen from the lenses represented by the books he owned and wrote upon.

The premise from which the author starts is that he can offer readers a new perspective on the life of the soviet Soviet ruler, analyzing this remaining collection of books that survived Stalin's death and even more so, his annotations. Forcing the reader to glance over how, like any other individual, Stalin *evolved*, grew during his life -from living in a workers' family in Georgia, with abusive parents, to a Catholic Seminary student whose life was surrounded by the effects of the process of forced russification around him and not form new opinions, views, values from his various experiences. Like such, Roberts wishes that, through his text, we can come to see Stalin in a more eloquent manner. This is why he argues that part of the answer to the question *Who was Stalin?* can be understood through the *Pometki*.

The methodology is qualitative. The analysis covers the notes and documents of Stalin, such as the list that contained the titles of all the books in the library. Stalin owned a vast amount of books and Roberts used them to offer as large a vision as possible over his life.

Most people probably do not know about Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin is the fact that he was a bibliophile, a book lover. Even though he did not enter any university, choosing the life of an active politician, he managed to gather during his life more than 25 000 volumes of poetry,

novels and more importantly, works of non-fiction varying from Marxist theory to philosophy and especially history. After his death however, the Soviet Union went through the process of destalinization, in which Khrushchev tried to separate himself from the decisions and deeds of his predecessor. Such as this, the library of Stalin was for the most part lost, many of the volumes taken by others or destroyed.

The novelty of Roberts's vision over Stalin is revealed from the first chapter. Here, he begins his analysis over Stalin's love for books, by showing a general image of his intellectual life. But even taking all of this into consideration, an argument that can be perceived as litigious, difficult to digest is that Stalin was not a psychopath, but actually he actually had a high level of emotional intelligence. Moreover, Roberts motivates the cruelty of his actions as targeting solely "enemies of the revolution". The reason for which he saw enemies in so many innocent people would have come from his too strong empathy, which made him see only the worst in people, raising his paranoia to the extremes. Apart from few other such remarks, his objectivity is remarkable, going over how many authors are subjective due to their limited access to resources. Thanks to his diligence and amplitude of his scientific methods, Roberts offers a critical interpretation of Stalin's life.

The numerous pages that create the "main character's" biography in this paper always gravitate towards the focus of this book, namely the collection saved from Stalin's library and the books on which he did his annotations. Books had a central role in Stalin's life.

Roberts manages to steadily show how books gave and consolidated ideas to the dictator, both at an ideologically-marxist level and at a general knowledge one. His favorite authors seem to have been the Marxist fathers: Marx, Lenin, but he was interested even in his rival's works, especially Trotski. The annotations we can see in these books, Stalin's activity as a librarian in his own library and even his activity as editor of his own autobiography, offers Roberts the possibility of concluding that even though Stalin was not the most profound or subtle thinker, that even though he was not the most original one either, he was however for certain an intellectual.

Worthy of praise is the diligence the author had in completing the puzzle of over 25 000 pieces that Stalin's library represented. After the death of the dictator, the library was dismantled and most of the books were lost or at least spread over numerous other private libraries -such as the library of Stalin's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Molotov. Roberts manages to find small pieces of this library and maybe a very interesting aspect of the book we are discussing is that it shows documents such as the

list of subjects on which Stalin organized his library. He wanted the volumes to be arranged based on 32 subjects, from philosophy to memoirs. He also desired the Marxist-Leninist authors to be classified separately.

Concerning the fiction Stalin used to read, we do not have as much information, the majority of them being lost once he passed away. This was mostly because they had no annotations from the owner and as such, they weren't deemed as relevant for being archived.

On the other hand, we are offered a series of photographs. Alongside the portraits of Stalin together with his youngest two children, Vasily and Svetlana, or that of his second wife, Nadejda Alliluyeva, we are presented the portrait of Lenin and Stalin's main librarian, Shushanika Manuchar'yants. Most of the photographs are done to the documents, such as the classification of books for Stalin's library, written by hand by the ruler or the annotations he did in works such as *Terrorism and Communism* by Karl Kautsky.

These *Pometki* come in various colours we are told, each colour representing the opinion of Stalin. This reminds us of another Stalinist leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the leader of the Romanian Popular Republic.

Most of the time, if Stalin did not agree to what was written, he would write sarcastic comments such as 'ha, ha', but if he agreed, he would concisely write 'yes, yes', 'good', 'agreed' etc. Roberts does underline the fact that Stalin might have been aware of the fact that his annotations could be analyzed *post mortem* and exaggerate as such.

*Stalin's Library* addresses a specialized public, but also amateur readers, as the language used, the semantics and sentencing are all done in an accessible manner. For the moment, the book only exists in English.

Following the read-through of this work, we can highlight some conclusions. The library of Stalin, of which he took a lot of care, offers us a novel perspective, a macroscopic image of the ruler's inner self and conceptions. Regarding Roberts's research, he manages to bring in focus a new approach over a very much debated subject, attracting readers of experience, but also who are just curious to know more about the life of Joseph V. Stalin.

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