

2026-9-7

# Lessons learned from Stalin's biography

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The Denver Gazette 7 Sep 2026 · B6 · MICHAEL BARONE Michael Barone is a senior political analyst for the Washington Examiner, resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and longtime co-author of The Almanac of American Politics.

History illuminates the present. I've been reading Stephen Kotkin's widely and justly praised multi-volume biography of Joseph Stalin and have encountered many passages that illuminate the present.



I learned, for example, that Stalin met the exiled Vladimir Lenin more than a decade before the October 1917 revolution and that by the early 1920s until his death in 1924, Lenin was in failing health, confined to an estate with "a staff, including the worker-cook Spiridon Putin," Russian President Vladimir Putin's grandfather.

That provides an interesting context for Vladimir Putin's 2005 speech in which he said that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."

I see echoes of the present as well in the early Bolsheviks' bewilderment on just how to put Marxist theory into practice in a war-torn Russia.

"We go forward to the complete elimination of money," Grigory Zinoviev explained to German socialists in 1920. "We pay wages in commodities. We introduce trolleys without fares. We have free public schools, free, if temporarily poor, meals, rent-free apartments, free lighting.

"We are realizing all this," he went on, "very slowly, under the most difficult conditions. We have to fight ceaselessly, but we have a way out, a plan." The early Soviets sound very much like the Democratic Socialists of America.

Compare DSA cochairwoman Megan Romer talking about people having "democratic control" of their workplaces, housing, "everybody having a union," "the working class being in charge of the means of production."

It's clear, if you watch the video of her interview by New Yorker editor David Remnick, that neither she nor the DSA has any clear idea how these goals could be accomplished. One is reminded that New York

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City's DSA Mayor Zohran Mamdani's first cityowned grocery store is promised to open by the end of 2027 — 24 months after he took office. *Note*

Nor is it clear how, without overturning the Constitution, "democratic control" can be transformed into the DSA's government "by the working class." Certainly, it's not possible to achieve the DSA's goals of abolishing the Senate, the Supreme Court and the presidency without scrapping the Constitution. Lenin's and Stalin's communists, of course, had no scruples about abolishing existing institutions. But one thesis of Kotkin's biography is that Stalin genuinely believed in Marxism and that Russia could not achieve it while it was still predominantly a peasant farmer economy without creating a "working class" of industrial factory workers.

To do that, it was necessary to squeeze money out of peasant farmers to finance modern factories, even if that meant murdering prosperous farmers and imposing multiyear famines that killed millions in Ukraine and beyond. Among the Bolsheviks, Kotkin argues, only Stalin had the nerve and persistence to impose this system of mass murder.

If Stalin was trying to create a dominant "working class" where it did not yet exist, current American socialists and liberals say their aim is to help a "working class" that is, as the American Enterprise Institute's Ruy Teixeira has shown, no longer the dominant part of the workforce or the electorate. The Democratic Party started to lose blue-collar worker votes as it embraced liberal cultural values in the 1970s, and the process, highly visible in the Donald Trump years, in which college graduates have moved toward Democrats and noncollege whites and Hispanics have moved toward Republicans, had visible beginnings in Bill Clinton's and Newt Gingrich's 1990s.

The American Left's abrupt switch from one cultural cause to another, from so-called climate change to Israel's supposed "genocide" in response to Hamas' vicious attacks of Oct. 7, 2023, has not sparked "working-class" enthusiasm. Democrats' current leads in polling for November's elections owe much more to inflation attributable to Trump's tariffs and oil price increases attributable to military action against Iran.

One lesson from Kotkin's biography is that the outcomes of war are never predictable and that the damage from protracted wars in which neither side is winning, and the violence and killing continue seemingly endlessly, such as World War I a century ago and Russia's war on Ukraine today, is especially grievous.

Stalin, Kotkin points out, clearly understood that the Bolshevik takeover of Russia could never have happened absent what was then called the Great War. And there is no question that that war was essential to the rise of not only Stalin but also of Adolf Hitler.

Each of those two evil dictators spent part of his 30s in prison and lived in total obscurity when the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was murdered and war broke out in 1914. But in Europe's two largest nations, both sore from military defeat and devastated by economic chaos, both were able to enter offices in their 40s and quickly accumulate absolute dictatorial power.

And on Aug. 23, 1939, they signed the Hitler-Stalin pact, which enabled them to seize control of most of the landmass of Eurasia, a symbiotic union of two totalitarianisms that caused the deaths of tens of millions and inspired the vision of George Orwell's "1984."

Our problems today are not as serious, the enemies of decent civilizations today are not as powerful, and the wars and mass murders of today are not as unchecked as they were in Hitler's and Stalin's time.

But Kotkin's biography is a reminder that even threats that seem very unlikely can turn out to be disastrous and that decent societies cannot afford to ignore upsurges of speech suppression, antisemitism and organized violence.

As Ferdinand's driver took the wrong turn in Sarajevo and stalled the car in front of the assassin Gavrilo Princip, no one thought Stalin and Hitler would be the most consequential and deadly leaders of the 20th century.

