THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

# PUTIN AND RUSSIAN POWER IN THE WORLD: THE STALIN LEGACY

Washington, D.C.

Monday, December 1, 2014

**Introduction and Moderator:**

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. TALBOTT: Great. Good afternoon to all of you. We're in for what I think is going to be not just a very probing and interesting discussion of history, but we have both in the topic and in our guest of honor, a combination that will give us a rare opportunity to look at current events and maybe even speculate a little bit about the future and the context of history.

I think you all are very well aware of Stephen Kotkin's extraordinary product over the years, and he coined a phrase that will probably come up in this conversation, which is "Stalinism as a civilization." It sends a little bit of a chill up my spine, but it's very germane. His current book is not a slim volume. I almost dropped it on the Belgium ambassador's foot, which would have been a bad way to start. But I read it in the course of about two weeks, and I'm a slow reader, because it is so compelling. It's the first of a trilogy on the life and times, and boy did that life have an effect on those times, of Joseph Sorianovich Sugashealy. And I hope at some point in the course of our conversation Stephen will tell us not just how the name Stalin arose, because that's kind of a prosaic, almost, but his nickname, Koba, which relates, among other things, to the issue of how somebody from the borderlands of the Russian empire, by no means a Russian himself, would take what has been for -- I think we agreed -- about 200 years, the largest territorial state on the planet, and took it from an almost total collapse during and because of World War I and the Russian Revolution, and put it into the center of global geopolitics for the 20th century and now into the 21st century.

What struck me, and I've read, as have -- I'm looking across the faces I see here -- as have so many of you -- I've read earlier biographies of Stalin, and Stephen's, I think, is extraordinary and maybe unique in this regard. And it's almost a magic trick. He takes somebody who deserves the reputation of being a monster who

built and presided over a monstrosity and he humanizes that monster in a way that makes you understand how he, Stalin, was able to succeed in, to put it mildly, a very rough neighborhood and a very rough profession, and at a very rough time in the history of the world, and certainly in the history of Russia.

So what I thought we would do is as quickly as possible, open this up to a conversation that will involve as many of you as we can, and that will depend on those of you who raise your hand and get a microphone asking succinct questions that are real questions and singular questions.

But I would like to have just a little bit of an interchange with Stephen myself about the country before we get to two personalities; the two personalities being the two most powerful Kremlin leaders of the last 90 years -- Stalin and a guy I haven't mentioned yet, but you know who that is. And Fiona is smiling. And that's Vladimir Putin.

So Stephen, you came to this, given your lifelong or career long interest in Russia. Just give us a kind of intro that has us in your head as you thought about taking on this momentous task.

MR. KOTKIN: Thank you. Thank you for the invitation. This is my first time speaking at Brookings. It's a great honor to be here.

I wrote a book about Russian power in the world and about Stalin's power in Russia, and the two are equally important. And so just a Russian power in the world question, obviously, is complex, and I see a lot of specialists in the audience, but at the risk of going over some elementary things, we can look at it this way. This is how I begin the book and how I think it connects to the present day.

So crazily enough, the British and the French, for more than 100 years, fought a war for supremacy and the British won. By 1815, the British are the dominant power in the world without question. It is a British world. How the British won and why

the French lost this war is a separate issue, but it had a lot to do with the FISK, the ability to raise taxes, efficient government, creating the national bank, the national debt, customs. The French were very bad at these kind of questions, and in fact, the king had his head taken off as a result.

So the British, when you have a British-dominated world, this is, of course, something for the Russians to deal with. Russian power in the world has to come to grips with British power. But then there are two ruptures in world history that occur. One is Bismarck's unification of Germany. Now you have a new, extremely dynamic power on the continent, and the other is the Meiji restoration in Japan, where you have a consolidated nation that's also going to undergo fast-paced industrialization and become a supreme power in East Asia. So it just so happens that these two ruptures in world history -- German unification and Meiji restoration, flank Russia. They're on either side of the Russian empire.

So in the 1870s, there's a new world order and that's the decade that Stalin is born. This is the world that he's born into. So that's how the book begins, and that's the proposition to launch this. So that's how the book begins, and that's the proposition to launch this.

Now, there's one other major historical rupture. It's not quite consonant with this, and that is the victory of the north in the Civil War in the United States. This happens in the 1860s, obviously, not the 1870s, and its consequences are not felt immediately; certainly not as immediately as the Germany unification and Meiji restoration. But looking over the world system is a northern industrial dominated U.S. power, which is going to become the largest economy in the world by the 1890s for sure; certainly, by 1900; and is going to look extremely large for the question of managing Russian power in the world as Stalin's regime is going to evolve and as those in charge

of Russian power today can tell you.

There's one other small piece, and that is that the Qing Empire decline corresponds with the rise of British power. It looks coincidental. There is some connection, but essentially, China will go down right when the British rise. So China is a peripheral player until very recently, and now, of course, China is no longer a peripheral player, but China's rise is taking place in a U.S. dominated world.

So it's inside this world that Stalin is born and that the Russian power question. How to manage Russia's role as a great power is a proposition that, as I say, the book begins with, and we see Czarist statesmen trying to come to grips with this.

There are a couple of characteristics that we can see. One is that you have kind of defensive expansionism. They keep taking more territory and they keep saying in order to hold the territory we took, we've got to take the next one over. And if we don't take it, we'll be in trouble; we'll be invaded.

And so you have this constant expansion of Russian power vis-à-vis its neighbors. About 50 square miles a day for three and a half centuries. But from their point of view, it's an expansion which is defensive because they have no natural borders and this is the only way to protect themselves. So to the neighbors it looks like aggression; to the Russians, it looks like self-defense.

So we have this in spades with Stalin because the Russian revolution, which happened during World War I, the Civil War, the Russian Empire dissolves and a number of states that used to be part of Imperial Russia become independent. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, right, the Baltic states, Poland, Finland, they're outside Russia under Stalin's initial rule in the inner war period, and there's a constant worry that these are the areas to be used for aggression against the Soviet State. And so Stalin's 1920s military intelligence reports are absolutely overflowing with Poland, Polish aggression, Polish-

Japanese cooperation; right? So not only do you have the Russian-Japanese rise on either side; you have the breakoff of pieces of the Russian Empire, which are seen as threatening, and therefore have to be regained. Stalin, as I detail in the book, will attempt coups in Germany, in Estonia. There's one in Bulgaria. They're all failures. These are the 1920s. The only one that's a success is the one in Mongolia, which becomes the first Soviet satellite.

But anyway, so we have a pattern here of relationship to the neighbors, whereby the neighbors are seen as ipso facto threatening, and for Russian security, you need to expand into the territory occupied by the neighbors. If you fast-forward a little bit -- obviously we're fast-forwarding through a lot of history that is complex and we don't want to simplify it too much -- but if you fast-forward, we have a version of this now where somehow, independent pieces of the former Russian Empire, ipso facto, threatening the Russian power in the world. That doesn't mean it's always got to be like this; this is a choice. There are other choices that are possible. But this sort of history of rupture, German power, and Japanese power inside the British-dominated world, all surrounding the Russian Empire and Russia managing its relations vis-à-vis these countries. So as I say, that's where the book begins, and therefore Russian power in the world is at least as important a question as Stalin's power in Russia.

MR. TALBOTT: Going to the personality now of Stalin, again, it's a story that we know almost as a myth, but you've gotten well beneath the myth. What would you say are the principal incidents of good luck that he had, and what were the unique skills and qualities he had to emerge as the top guy, pretty much at the end of this volume, which takes you up to 1927?

MR. KOTKIN: So we have to be careful. When someone is a murderous tyrant, the inclination is, of course, to diminish them because of the crimes

that they committed, the horrors that occurred under their rule. But one doesn't want to, just because he's a murderous tyrant, make him out to be a nonentity, a mediocrity, which of course is what his enemies have done. At the same time, you have to be careful not to err in the other direction, which is to take the regime propaganda at face value and make him out to be a supreme genius in all things.

So you just go back to the original materials. Instead of the regime propaganda, instead of the immigration anti-Stalin literature, you go back and try to chat with what we can document, well-document where this guy came from.

The first and most important thing you can say is that he gets nowhere near power unless the whole world is destroyed. Without World War I, without the destruction of the existing order, there's no way a guy born on the periphery of the Russian Empire, to a father who is a shoemaker and a mother who is a washer woman, is going to get anywhere near the seat of power. So it's actually necessary to describe how the world was destroyed in order to explain where Stalin could come from.

The second thing you can about him is that he had an ordinary childhood. In other words, there's nothing special about his childhood, except if you're reading backwards from the murders and looking to pick out some things. So, for example, maybe he was beaten as a child. Maybe he wasn't though, because the documentation on his beatings is actually very, very slight. And in any case, I was beaten as a child and I have yet to murder 10 million people. Maybe it's early yet, but nonetheless, by my age he was already going full speed.

You know, so I decided instead to follow his close comrades and when they began to sense that his behavior was a little bit peculiar. In other words, not in retrospect, you know, 30 years hence and then looking back and saying that, gee, he was really weird when he was 12 or something like this; right? That kind of stuff just

doesn't hold water. But what about the guys who work with him? There's an incident in the summer of 1923 when a document comes forward, brought out by Krupskaya in typescript and handed to Zenobia. It's calling for Stalin's removal. Now, there's no actual original documentation on this. We're not sure that this is a dictation from Lenin. It could be, but it could also be invented by Lenin's wife, Krupskaya. In any case, it comes forward asking for -- calling for Stalin's removal.

Now, you had a lot of ambitious guys around Stalin who might want to be number one themselves. In addition, if they feared his personality, if they feared for their personal safety, if they feared for the fate of the revolution, you would think that they would follow, you know, the alleged dictation from Lenin to remove Stalin. In fact, they do nothing of the sort. Zenobia, who is the one -- who is the recipient of this typescript from Lenin's wife, Krupskaya, only calls for a balancing of Stalin's power by appointing some people next to him, not for Stalin's removal. Kamenev, who is also a very high figure next to Stalin, working with Stalin on a day-to-day basis, tells Zenobia even that isn't necessary.

So here you have the people closest to him on a day-to-day basis. Kamenev has known Stalin for 20 years at this point. Kamenev is the one who in 1904 gave Stalin the Russian translation of Machiavelli's prints, which remained in Stalin's library even after he died. And so if they don't see the evil psychopath in the summer of 1923, when they could have acted upon the alleged dictation by Lenin to remove him -- certainly, that's what I would have done had I been ambitious or worried about him.

So this kind of close scrutiny of the original source material and the episodes lead you to see that whatever behavior he was exhibiting by summer of 1923, he was not the psychopath that people would make him out to be later. And so therefore, you know, that pushes the question of when we begin to see that behavior, but I follow

that closely in the book.

The third thing you need to know about Stalin is that he was very shrews and he worked very hard. He outworked them all. He read his Marx, Engels, and Lenin. He had little white sheets of paper inside the collected volumes so that he could find the quotations. He could cite Lenin by hart in many cases, the same way that Russians today can cite Pushkin by heart, for example. And he outworked and he out read them.

At the same time, he was not a genius, as I pointed out. He didn't understand fascism. He thought fascism was some type of finance capital. He had a class analysis of fascism. So we wouldn't want to make him out to be a genius, but nonetheless, he is extremely clever, extremely hardworking, and extremely adept at organization, at the hard, nitty-gritty work.

Finally, the fourth point on his rise is luck. Now, you know, there's an old joke E. B. White used to say, you know, to make it in New York you have to be ready to be lucky. And it's right, because we all have luck come our way but we don't seize that opportunity all the time. He seizes the luck that comes his way. Part of the luck is the relationship with Lenin, so he's a Lenin protégé from early on, and he doesn't make the mistake of trying to be Lenin's equal, which is the mistake that Trotsky makes. He doesn't lecture to Lenin. He doesn't correct Lenin in public, some of the things that Trotsky does.

The other thing in the luck is, you know, Lenin appoints Stalin general secretary of the party in April 1922, and in May 1922, Lenin has a stroke. So that's pretty lucky. How about if you were appointed the number two, the deputy, and then a few weeks later the number one becomes incapacitated? And Stalin, of course, took advantage of that situation because being general secretary of the party was a position that nobody else had, and he, therefore, was a dictator, or had the possibility of a

personal dictatorship built into his appointment once Lenin had the stroke.

MR. TALBOTT: Let me just go back to one adjective or adverb. It was either alleged or allegedly. You probably searched harder and longer than anybody for the Lenin testament, and what did you find?

MR. KOTKIN: Yeah. So, you know, not all documentation was kept. Of course, this is a communist regime and there was a lot of purging of the archives. Some of the archives are still not open. Materials are continually declassified even now. I still get scans from colleagues of mine of recently declassified material from the archives. I was doing the copy editing for volume one; I was still getting recently declassified material.

However, having said that, there's a voluminous documentation around almost all the major stuff. And if one document was destroyed, the other one, the copy or related documents were kept. So with this episode where late in life Lenin is supposed to have broken with Stalin and call for Stalin's removal, there's no actual original text. There's no shorthand document in the handwriting of the secretaries who allegedly took down this dictation. And I thought, that's really weird. Where is that document? Because there is shorthand dictation in the secretary's handwriting for other events around this time. There's no recording in Lenin's secretariat of the documents being sent anywhere. Anytime a Lenin document was received or sent, they made a recording. And there are these really puzzling recordings by the doctors about how Lenin couldn’t speak and Lenin was having paranoiac attacks.

And so you begin to put all these jigsaw puzzle pieces together and you begin to wonder the extent to which the things that we thought we knew, such as the late Lenin break with Stalin, are not really documented. It could have happened. I'm not disputing that it could have happened. I'm just saying that we don't have any

documentation to prove that it happened, and we have some circumstantial evidence and other documentation indicating -- I mean, think about it this way. There's a methodology that Lenin dictated this testament at the end of his life, late December 1922, January '23, after a series of major strokes, and that it was done as a latter to the party congress and put under seal and was only going to be opened after his death.

Well, Krupskaya hands the typescript to Zenobia in May 1923. Lenin is still alive. Moreover, she hands the first typescript and it doesn't work. It doesn't hurt Stalin. And so she hands another typescript to him in June 1923. That's the part that calls for his removal.

So if you see the process by which the documents came out and the context in which they came out, this also leads you to be a little bit suspicious about these typescripts. But in the end, you know, Stalin used them against the others. He turned the tables on them. And so he never repudiated publicly that this was Lenin's testament. They served his purposes.

So once again, I don't dispute that they could be, but the goal going back with the original materials is to check everything to make sure that it pans out.

MR. TALBOTT: But towards the very end of the book when you're looking back over the career up to '27, I think I recall you were writing something along the lines that while he had achieved by then almost the acne of power, he had his insecurities and his paranoia, one of which was that he never really had the blessing. At a minimum, he never had the blessing of Lenin, and maybe he had something worse than that.

MR. KOTKIN: He's got supreme power, and then there's this typescript that's circulating, which calls for his removal and is attributed to Lenin. Now, this begins to affect his psyche. He resigns six times. There are six recorded resignations, either

orally or written, including as late as December 19, 1927. He submits a resignation and it falls to Alexei Rikoff, who is the number two person in the regime and a fantastically important figure, in December 1927, to rebuff Stalin's sixth resignation that's documented. There may be more but that's all that we've been able to find so far. And then the next month, Stalin goes to Siberia and announces he's collectivizing agriculture.

So Rikoff had the chance to remove Stalin in December 1927 because Stalin, at his own hand, is asking to resign. And so you go through and you see this. There's a tortured dimension to his relationship with Lenin that arises out of this typescript attributed to Lenin calling for Stalin's removal. And he's haunted by it.

You know, one of the things that we see in biography, you know, someone, a greater painter or a great novelist or a great poet, and they produce transcend works of art, and then a biographer comes along and talks about their relationship with their mother, their relationship with the father, right, all oedipal complex, this and that, and we begin to say that can't be right because the artist transcendent, and we all have difficult relationships with our mother or our father or whatever; right? It's the transcendent art that's eternal and that needs to be explained and maybe not the personal foibles that we can find retrospectively. It could be that they help explain the art, but the art is bigger than that.

So Stalin's dictatorship is a work of art. It's not a work of art in the moral sense. I don't have any sympathy for the communist project. I don't have any sympathy for the morality that Stalin expressed, the Marxism-Leninism that he espoused, which he espoused out of conviction is not something that I identify with. But nonetheless, it's breathtaking, the creation of the personal dictatorship inside the Bolshevik dictatorship, the imposition of collectivization, which is the great crime of his regime, much worse than the 1937-1938 terror of collectivization, the enslavement of the peasantry beginning in

1928.

And so it turns out that it's the politics. It's the creating the dictatorship, it's the running the dictatorship that is forming Stalin's personality, including the testament attributed to Lenin. So it's the great artwork as it were in the political sense that helps explain the personality of Stalin.

MR. TALBOTT: By the way, I'm sure there are some Tweeters out there. Before you tweet Stephen saying that Stalin is one of the great artists of all time and left us a great masterpiece, one line that I remember from reading the book is that you say -- I'll get this approximately right, I hope, "He had no principals; he had only goals. He had no morality; he had only means."

Let's just do -- I'm going to come to you all in just a second. I'd like to pose one more question. He out ideologued the ideologues. He out bureaucratized the bureaucrats. He worked harder than anybody. He did his homework. He was very careful not to make enemies where it counted with the possible exception of Krupskaya; with the definite exception of Krupskaya.

MR. KOTKIN: Yes.

MR. TALBOTT: Lenin's wife. But he never learned to speak Russian like a Russian. Famous Russians, at least after he was safely dead, made a lot of fun of his Georgian accent. And early in the book, when you're setting up this extraordinary life story, you do a kind of anticipatory similarity between a Corsican who never learned to speak French all that well and an Austrian who rose to a certain level in Germany.

To what extent do you think his hinterland origins and his non-Russian ethnicity were either a driving force in his own climbing of the slippery pole and also perhaps even an advantage to him?

MR. KOTKIN: Yeah. So Stalin, an ethnic Georgian, spoke with an

accident his whole life, Georgian accent. You can listen to the recordings, the YouTube recordings, for example. Stalin had a problem. His vocal chords were weak, and so he spoke very softly. In addition to the accent, before the microphone era, when Stalin would speak at party congresses, nobody in the hall could hear him. They couldn't understand what he was saying. This is very interesting; I didn't know this. Eventually, they get the microphones, but even with the microphones it's still very hard to understand him in a big auditorium or in a big room because of the softness of his voice that came from this problem that he had with his vocal chords. He was a singer, a choir boy as a youth, but over time his vocal chords deteriorated.

So Stalin had a competitive advantage for sure in being a Georgian ethnic who was Russified and identified with Russian imperial power. He was one of the few Bolshevik's at the very top of the regime that knew something about the multinational empire. This was critical for the formation of the Soviet Union. It was critical even for the civil war episode of retaking various lands. As Lenin used to say, you know, don't self-determination. Don't self-determinate X province or don't self-determinate this republic. Stalin went out and self-determined it by reconquering it with the Red Army.

So yes, it served him as an advantage, but then he tried to figure out how to manage this question. How to manage the multinational empire within the communist project. And one of the things he did was to promote the national republics in a way to consolidate them. Not to consolidate them in the ways that they might have done it themselves, but in the communist way. You know, it was Soviet Ukraine. It wasn't just Ukraine; it was Soviet Ukraine. But nonetheless, it was regime policy pushed by Stalin, and this comes out of his understanding of nationalism to promote national consciousness and national territorial units.

Now, the problem with that, of course, is that the Soviet Union breaks up

and those national territorial units become independent, the problem from Moscow's point of view. That's not the problem from those national territorial units' point of view.

So you have Vladimir Putin, who is pretending that the Stalin legacy doesn't exist. In other words, there's a new Russia from the 18th century. Catherine the Great's conquest on the Black Sea. Well, yes, that was true in the late 18th century, but then there was a whole 20th century, which is Stalin's consolidation of Soviet Ukraine, including its territorial expansion and its promotion of Ukrainian identity in the cities which have not been predominately Ukrainian national consciousness before; right?

So you have all of this history, too, which relates to Stalin's background, which is related to his ability to rise up in the system, but also his transformative effects. So the long-term effect of Stalin's Georgianness was the opposite of his intention; right? It was the de-imperialization of this vast territory. I mean, he won World War II but then he lost the peace for similar reasons; right? The ability to maintain a world order after World War II that was in the interests of Soviet communism was related to the occupation of Eastern Europe. And of course, that didn't work over the long term. That unraveled and the communist leaders, as well as the post-communist leaders had to deal with the fact that they lost the peace because of the way that Stalin managed the peace, the victory over Hitler after World War II; right?

And so you have this really consequential history that's very difficult for the Putin regime to assimilate. What they're basically doing or trying to do, is to de-communize the communist period to make it into the Russian national story that Stalin also party promoted, to take away the fact that there was the communist party; to take away the fact that it was communist at all. Instead, it was a Russian national story, victory over World War II, so Stalin can be promoted as a great leader who brought up peasant country to be a nuclear armed superpower with the victory over Hitler. The

symbolism, the rituals, the gildedness, we can take that from the Czarist period. We have Alexander the Third; we have Pyotr Stolypin. We have all of these great Czarist figures that provide the rich symbolism of it, and the communist period is assimilated as a greater power, superpower story with all of the rest of the history evacuated.

And so this is a move that is very strong now. If you go to bookstores in Russia, if you watch television in Russia, the Internet in Russia is full of this national consciousness filtering the Soviet period such that the communism -- the style and the communism is reduced. But you cannot understand these people unless you understand that they were communists.

The most important discovery of the secret archives, the great revelation of the secret archives is that they spoke the same way behind closed doors as they spoke in public. They really believed; they were true-believing communists. And this, however, is not to say that once again I identify with these values; right? I don't identify with it. I just give them their due that they had these convictions. One of the convictions of a Leninist is that any means are appropriate in order to realize the Leninist goals. And so that, of course, gives you the ability to violate the ideas even as you're implementing them, the maximum flexibility.

But in the end, you have a tragic history that's very difficult to assimilate, but there were things that Stalin did that Putin cannot overcome. And then there are behaviors that we see with Stalin that Putin is trying to learn from. Putin is not a figure on the level of Stalin. There is no figure in world history with fewer exceptions that are on the level of Stalin in terms of how long they ruled and what happened under their rule. There's Mao Tse Tung. Okay. Hitler is 12 years of horrors. It's a very important episode but much shorter than Stalin's horrors. And Lenin is, of course, much shorter than Stalin, too. So really, you're only dealing with Mao, and by the time I get to the end of the story,

volume three, you have an eclipse of Stalin even while he's still alive by the figure of Mao.

MR. TALBOTT: This thing with the comparison and the contrast between Putinism and Stalinism, it seems to me, on the basis of what you've just said, that the most salient difference between the two isms is that Stalinism was based on the glorification of ethnic pluralism and subsuming all nationalisms into an internationalist ideology; whereas, Putin has substituted for that international ideology, Russian chauvinism with its companion piece, irredentism.

First of all, is that a fair characterization? And as you extrapolate from that looking forward, do you see a danger for Russia?

MR. KOTKIN: One of the reasons Putin is very different from Gorbachev -- there are many different reasons, okay, not just one reason. But one of the reasons is because Gorbachev was in charge of a multiethnic state, the Soviet Union, for which integration into larger structures could make sense. The country is 50-something percent ethnic Russian under Gorbachev. Now, today's Russia is more than 80 percent ethnic Russian. It is a very Russian national state in composition. And so the idea of managing a multinational empire is not as salient as it was under Gorbachev. Instead, you're dealing with a Russian national -- something like this we have with Serbia and Yugoslavia. In some ways, Yugoslavia was an attempt to contain Serbia nationalism. And in some ways, the Soviet Union was a container of Russian nationalism.

But here's the thing that's similar though. For all those differences, those are very, very important. And when you go down the Russian nationalist path, when you are conjuring a Russian national story, when you are playing to the Russian national crowd as Putin is doing, we're not sure where this is going.

But here's the similar part which is very important. Time and time again,

Russia is somehow humiliated by the West, somehow mistreated by the West, somehow is cheated by the West, and therefore, has to invade its neighbors. We saw this with the Cold War story; right? Stalin wanted a partnership, he wanted to come out of World War II and to keep the alliance together, he wanted to be friends with everybody, but they were mistreated and there was all sorts of bad stuff that the West did to him and the Marshall Plan and everything else. And so we had to take over all the East European countries and form clone regimes there; right?

So this pattern is a pattern we have to be careful. I'm not saying that Western behavior contributed nothing at all to the Putin regime's behavior. That's not my statement. I'm just saying we have to be very careful about constantly watching this phenomenon where Russia is defining itself in relation to the West as an aggrieved, cheated, humiliated country, right, for which it has to take revenge because of this alleged mistreatment. Russia's definition of itself against the West -- providential power, special mission, exceptional country, right, this is something we see. Throughout the Czarist period we have a version of this, the Communist period we have a version of this, and today we have a version of this. They don't join international organizations very easily. They don't join alliances. They feel that their distinctiveness is very important and needs to be recognized. And that distinctiveness, unfortunately -- this is very unfortunately -- comes at the expense of a western identity. In other words, to be distinctively Russian, somehow there's an anti-westernism built into that. That's not a given in every single historical epoch and there are countervailing tendencies to that, but it's a very strong possible pathway for the leaders to take and we're now seeing it again. I think it's very detrimental to long-term Russian interests, but nonetheless, it's very popular in certain quarters. The Putin regime, we have to be careful with its popularity. It's an authoritarian regime without alternatives. So when we use things like high

approval ratings, public opinion polls, you know, that stuff is complex in an authoritarian setting. You've got to be very careful with that. The social base of the Putin regime is the Putin regime. That's the social base; it's themselves.

MR. TALBOTT: Okay. Yes, sir. We'll start with you.

Yes, a mic is coming to you. Please identify yourself.

SPEAKER: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

MR. TALBOTT: Here in the back.

I didn't want to hear that again.

SPEAKER: My succinct question.

I'd like to touch on your point about 1923 and how there was a normative acceptance of Stalin at that time which had significance, because whether from Vogal Gonav or other works, we know that when Plikonav left in November, right after October, Stalin cut him out and said he left the party, and we saw publicly the first time Stalin adopting the "you're with us or against us," no sentimentality. He opposed the minute of silence for him. He opposed Zenobia's fulsome obituary and profta. And then in Zaritsen, we saw him begin essentially paralleling Trotsky's militarism with the executions on the RAS and with Derujinsky and the Third Army going down and just literally shooting every 10 soldiers. All of these activities were well-known by the failure at Warsaw that Stalin was a crude executioner and a man of action and blood. I submit to you that the problem in 1923 was that they saw Trotsky as the bigger Bonapartist and the bigger danger, but the basic foundations of Stalin, his false binaries, "with us/against us," mass executions, and then the eliminationist vocabulary that began to creep in at the 10th and by the 15th party congress completely in full bloom were on stick.

So my question to you is was it a failure of the collective regime to recognize the sociopath in their midst? Or was he our sociopath and the bigger danger

was the left Bonapartism?

MR. KOTKIN: Yes. Thank you for your question.

So, you know, Stalin was a vindictive person, but was he more vindictive than the others? Stalin was a prickly person; was he more prickly than the others? Stalin was a Leninist; was he more Leninist than the others, including Lenin? You know, the issue for us to evaluate Stalin is not to take him out of his context but to put him back in the context; right? Difficult childhood. Well, you know, Kirov is an orphan. No father, no mother. He was raised in an orphanage. Was that a less difficult childhood than Stalin had; right? You need to see Stalin as part of this larger group.

Their choice wasn't only between Stalin and Trotsky. They had plenty of choices. Zenobia could have chosen himself. Kamenev could have chosen himself; right? They weren't so worried about Trotsky that they had to say, okay, "We'll take Stalin even though he's going to murder us all in a few years." Right?

It's true that there are behaviors that Stalin is exhibiting, but the issue is not are those behaviors true or false; that's true. It's are those behaviors so special that he stands out for that type of behavior at the time. The trial that he organizes, there's a kind of trial of counter revolutionaries in Zariv set in 1918, where Stalin invents the idea of the fifth column before the word and has a number of people executed to try to rally the workers, to try to rally the city to defend itself against the whites.

Well, that's civil war practice; that's not Stalin's practice; right? Trotsky is issuing execution orders left and right on his train. Lenin is coming out of these migraines and this insomnia and these horrible headaches he's got, right, saying, "Hang more Koolux from the lamppost and make sure everybody sees them; right? This is the Bolshevik milieu. You're describing, I think accurately, who these people were. But did they notice that Stalin was a threat to them or not? Because they had a chance to

remove him and it wasn't only to go to Trotsky. And so, yeah, I encourage you to look at the evidence that I presented and see whether you're persuaded or not. But let's put Stalin back into the larger history; right? Talk about his robberies in the underground before the revolution?

Well, I've got to tell you. You know, there were a lot of robberies in the Underground before the revolution. Stalin's prerevolutionary underground looks a lot like exile, boredom, imprisonment, not really a glorious, romantic life. And so, you know, we need to be careful in doing the history not to separate him out. He separates only when you saw him in the context.

MR. TALBOTT: I'm tempted to paraphrase the great Yates' line. That was, "No country for good men."

This gentleman down here and then we'll go back to the back.

MR. GROBI: My name is Stefan Grobi. I'm with Euro News European Television.

I'm also from Germany, so thanks for mentioning Adolf Hitler.

A very outlandish thought. If tomorrow Andrea Merkel invaded Poland to rescue the German minority or invaded Denmark to rescue the German minority, I'm sure she would not get away with it.

Now, what makes Putin believe that he can get away with his actions in the Ukraine? If, you know, in the loneliness of the night when he's really alone and he wakes up, does he really believe he can get away with it?

MR. KOTKIN: I don't know what Putin believes. I don't have deep inside information about his thought processes. There are people in the room who have met with him. I've been in a room with him. But I think we impute motives to him without really knowing for sure. Many people in the Russian regime are asking this question.

They're in the second echelon of power, and they're trying to figure out what he's up to, what his strategy is, if any, what he really believes. You know, it could be that he's not sure himself. All right?

Now, let's talk a little bit about Germany for a second. Now, one of the things about the Treaty of Versailles, the Treaty of Versailles is very difficult to defend. It's seen as a punitive piece, a terrible punitive piece at the time, and it's also seen as a failure to enforce the peace. Right? The U.S. goes home, the British say that it's not their responsibility, and the French are left holding the bag. So Versailles gets a bad word.

But let's suppose that they had the willpower to enforce the peace. That the Americans didn't go home, that the British really were going to make sacrifices to enforce it along with the French. Could they have enforced the Versailles peace? You see, because the only way that you get a piece of that is if German power and Russian power are flat on their back, as they are in 1919, and they stay flat on their back. The Versailles piece is accomplished at an anomalistic time in history. Either German power or Russian power or both are going to come back. Ad so there was no way, it was impossible to enforce the Versailles Peace, even if they will had been there.

So German power is now transformed. The German power we have today is extremely different. You know better than I do, but it's very impressive, the post-World War II achievements in Germany. The unification with breathtaking episode of success in my view. And so we now have a different German power on the continent, different from the one that Stalin confronted, different from the one his Czarist confronted.

But in 1991, we have a settlement. The Soviet Union is dissolved. By the way, it's dissolved by the leaders of -- elected leaders of elected leaders of Buella Russia, Ukraine, and Russia. We have to remember that it's not dissolved by Strobe

Talbott, by President George Bush, the first one, and it's dissolved by themselves. You have to remember this.

But you have Russia flat on your back, 1991. So this is an anomalous situation. Whatever the settlement that's imposed in 1991 is imposed at a time which is not going to last. And so Russia is not going to be flat on its back. At some point it's going to be a great power again. Not the Soviet Union again. That's exclusive for them. Certainly in the foreseeable future. But nonetheless, something more than they were in 1991, 1992, and 1993, when the Soviet collapse continued after '91 in the infrastructural and political and economic terms.

So now they're not flat on their back anymore and they don't like the settlement. Great powers that don't like the settlement sometimes revise the settlement, and they revised the international settlement that was imposed in 1991 with their complicity. They revise it if they can. They don't necessarily do it because it's a good thing for their people. Right? The leaders can do things which hurt the Russian people. That's not what we're talking about. We're not saying that we validate the actions of Russia. We're just saying that they're not so surprising and unexpected that they feel the settlement is unfair and they want to revise it. Right?

The issue for us is, you know, how to respond to that. One of the things about sanctions, they reason why there are sanctions on Russia is in part because we can impose sanctions on Russia; right? The U.S.-Russian relationship is not primarily a commercial one. The commercial dimension is absent. Of course, we have our friends in the energy sphere. We have our friends in agricultural machinery who have tremendously important sales in Russia. And so there is an element of commercial relationship there, but the commercial relationship is very slight. Why do we bomb countries in the Middle East? Well, one of the reasons is because we can. It's very hard

to bomb China, for example, but it's not that hard to bomb Middle Eastern countries. This is not a statement that it's a bad idea or a good idea; this is just about what's possible.

One of the things with Russia is you can't really bomb it, but you can impose sanctions on Russia in a way that you can impose sanctions on China to the same degree because of the depth, the scale of the commercial relationship that's there. So this is not a critique of the policy. I'm not suggesting I'm either pro or anti. I'm just talking about what's happening. So neither Russia's behavior nor the western response is that surprising in a longer historical framework. The surprising part is the fantastic transformation of Germany.

So Eastern Europe is a strip of land between German power and Russian power. That's all it is. There is all sorts of romanticism here. You know, there's Kafka and there's Havel, and I could go on. And you know this romanticism. But it's just a strip of land between German power and Russian power, and very fortunately, German power is transformed. And Russian power is not transformed. And so Eastern Europe is still between German power and Russian power, and thankfully, German power is what it is.

This is not to downplay the importance of Eastern Europe. It's not to downplay the achievements of Poland; right? This is not a statement, an ethical normative statement about any of that stuff; right? The only ethical normative statement I'm making is how impressed I am by the transformation in German power and the lack of transformation on the Russian power side.

Now, if you assume that Russian power is not going to undergo a transformation like what happened with the Germans, then you've got a problem to manage. And the way that you manage that problem, right, you can't bomb it, you can't invade it. It's very hard to provide lethal weapons to a state like Ukraine that isn't really --

doesn't have a state apparatus.

You know, one of the things people keep saying, "Let's give more aid to Ukraine." That's fine, but let's cut the middle man out and deposit it right in Switzerland. You know, who do you give the lethal weapons to in Ukraine? So you have a problem that there's no integrity in the state institutions. This is a Soviet legacy. The absence of any integrity in the state institutions. It's also a fantastic wrecking operation that Ukrainian elites performed on their state since 1991, shrinking the economy and ripping it off.

So it's very hard to know what the levers, the mechanisms are for managing this type of problem, so it's a real deep and fundamental problem, and part of it is that Russian power is not transformed in a way that many people hoped and many people tried, and that many Russians themselves tried. All right? And so until Russian power in the world is transformed, there needs to be some other solution in relations here.

MR. TALBOTT: Martin, there's a lady right behind you who had her hand up. And then we will come to you.

Yes?

SPEAKER: Talking about the response, do you believe that is should be in terms of diplomacy or in some other terms -- the response against Russia?

MR. KOTKIN: Yeah. So Russia has the most -- Russia's military is complex. The Russian military is not one gigantic military. They have between 30,000 and 50,000 real soldiers who are world-class level. And then they have several hundred thousand, maybe more than 800,000, who are beaten to a pulp by their fellow soldiers and eat dog food for their rations. And so the Russian Army is complex. But the 30,000 to 50,000 world-class Russian Army, we're leaving aside the nuclear weapons, is

something that no neighboring state has. And so you're asking what the response is given the fact that Russia has a military that no local power can match. The only power that can match the Russian military is an outside power. If there's going to be a military response, that's what we're talking about. We're talking about Germans going to die to defend whatever it is they're going to defend Russian military. We're talking about Americans going to die to defend them. All right? That's one possible policy. Because supplying locals to do that job, the mismatch is too great. You can somehow pull out of the air as much lethal aid to the Ukrainians as you want but it cannot match Russian power, in addition to the fact that there's no real place to go.

Now, the Ukrainian militias on the frontlines are very courageous and brave, and so you kind of want to help these people defending their territory. But your ability to counter the Russian military is very limited, so you have the sanctions policy. But ultimately, you're going to need a negotiated settlement. You're either going to attempt to indefinitely prolong the sanctions so that my grandkids are talking about the imposition of these sanctions, or if you can't indefinitely uphold sanctions, which history tells you is unlikely, your ability to do that, and you can't counter Russian military power without a significant outside force, then you're talking about the negotiating option.

Now, negotiating with perpetrators of crimes or evil or however you want to define what Russia's behavior is -- I'll leave that for you guys to define that. I'm not going to take a position on that. But negotiating with that is an affima. Many people feel that you can't negotiate because then you're rewarding bad behavior. But the alternative to non-negotiation in real terms, the practical real world alternative, not the alternative in the Op-ed pages; right? Not the alternative in the common room at Princeton University or whatever; right? But the alternative in the field is the current -- the status quo projected forward forever. Seven million people in East Ukraine living, right, without

power, without government services, without school systems, right, and then maybe spreading that. Because if you take some of the territory back in eastern Ukraine, Russian covert operations will blow up the train station in Laviv. Terrorize the population in western Ukraine. Then what's your response? Are you going to admit Romania into NATO in response to that? You already did that.

So they can destabilize Ukraine in ways that you don't have an effective counter -- you don't have an effective response. You can't counter that. If you gain territory in the east at their expense, they can destabilize Kiev. They can have covert operators go in there and do nasty stuff so that people are afraid to take public transportation and then they can claim that they didn't do it. Now, will they do this? I'm not saying that they're going to do this. I'm just talking about their capabilities versus your possible responses.

So, like I said, in the real world, as an affima as it may be for a lot of people, and I understand why, because you don't want to reward misbehavior, you don't want to reward violation of international law, you don't want to encourage this type of behavior, but if you're thinking about the population -- the civilian population of Ukraine, right, and if you're thinking about Russia's ability to destabilize other areas, and we can all name what those other areas are, and if you're thinking about situations in Asia that you also may have to confront and control, then a path towards negotiation looks to me like the realistic path that we would want to be on even though there is a kind of moral dimension there that we don't like.

MR. TALBOTT: Marvin?

MARVIN: Professor, thank you very much for a terrific presentation.

For the better part of 200 years now, Russia has been involved in a kind of internal war between westerners and Slavophils. In terms of world view, did Stalin

have any part of that, any vision of that, and does Putin have?

MR. KOTKIN: Yes, thank you for that question. That's a complicated one but I'll give a short answer and it'll be a little bit simplified, of course.

This is the problem. They would all love to be fortress Russia. This is an inclination we see time and again in Russia's rulers. They would all love to sort of pull up the drawbridges, fill the moat, and say, you know, we are our own destiny. We are a special providential power. We are the inheritors of Byzantium; however you want to express this.

But here's your problem, Marvin. The other side has got the technology. Fortress Russia, the temptation for fortress Russia, which is deep in the culture and every leader shares it, they can't have fortress Russia because the West either has the drilling technology for shale or the arctic or it's got avionics or whatever it might be in the various incarnations. The West always has technology that they need. So when they do the fortress Russia thing, on the one hand, when they beat their chest about being a distinctive civilization, all right, they're constantly, nonetheless beholden to the West for the technology. They can either buy it legally, set up front companies to try to buy it surreptitiously, which is what the KGB was doing in the post-war period and how we inherited a lot of that offshore misbehavior of the Yeltsin years. Right? That was all about acquiring embargo technology illegally, partly through the Germans. Right?

The same situation faces them today. They sit around and they say, you know, the West is humiliating us, the West is cheating us, the West doesn't understand us. We are a special country. We're not just a regular country. We're not some small junior partner in the EU. Right? But in order to drill in the arctic we're going to need some western technology. And so that dynamic is what you see. It's not just the Slavophil, as you called it, and westernizer problem. Right? Because the Slavophil stuff

is very, very deep but the western technology is inescapable for them. And so that's the lever we have over them. That's the -- Stalin got lucky. He decides to collectivize the peasants, full bore socializing, eradicate capitalism, eradicate markets, and he goes way out on a limb, saws the limb off, and then the West goes and has the Great Depression. And so now they need places to sell their technology because not a lot of steel plants are being built in the Rura Valley in Germany or in the Midwest of the United States. And so the guy catches a really lucky break. Now, you can argue that, "Oh, he's a Marxist so he predicted this." He knew that capitalism was going to undergo a great depression, so his timing was impeccable. But, you know, there hasn't been a great depression on that scale again the same way since that time. So they expected one after World War II. Even Truman expected a great depression in a capitalist world after World War II, and instead we go the middle-class economic boom, right, that helped win the Cold War.

And so, you know, Putin is gambling. It's a really big gamble. It looks to me like it's a calculated gamble, but it's a gamble in which he doesn't hold the full fate in his hands; right? He's audacious and he's keep them guessing. These are the qualities that Stalin had as well, and you can speculate, we don't know for sure, that he went to school with Stalin on this. Be audacious and keep them guessing. That empowers a Russian leader more than being like Gorbachev and giving a lot of speeches about the rule of law and about western partnership. The audacity and the keep them guessing. But the audacity and the keep them guessing isn't linked to a strategy. Is there some endpoint he's trying to reach that makes sense for enhancing Russian power in the world rather than diminishing Russian power in the world? Is he managing the legacies that they talk about in this book about Stalin in a way that's effective, that efficacious from a Russian elite point of view? The fullness of time will tell, but this dependency on the West for technology is the lever that we have over them and we have over every single

one of these regimes and their history.

MR. TALBOTT: Let's go towards the far back just to be fair. I see two -- either somebody is raising two hands. The gentleman with his hand up now, right there.

SPEAKER: My name is (inaudible), correspondent for the Austrian newspaper (inaudible).

Could you tell us about the reception in Russia of your book and how forthcoming have Russian authorities been in granting access to archives? And have you run into brick walls when you're trying to look for this or that document that would have been a bit unfortuitous for the official Russian position of this historical view? Thank you.

MR. KOTKIN: Thank you for that question.

One of the problems with Russia is that it's a country of informality. It's relationships, connections, people you know, whatever the formal rules might be. And so this can work to the detriment of building institutions with integrity, but it can also work to the advantage of those people who know how to manage -- create relationships, manage them, and on an informal basis, get a lot of stuff done.

So that's as far as I'll go on that particular point, except to add the following. Research on anything in Russia, including the Stalin period, is a problem of volume, not a problem of access. It is just so much material to assimilate. If you do it seriously, if you go through the original documents, in whatever form you can get your hands on them -- and there are various pathways to them -- it's just overwhelming how much material to work through.

And so the archives are a mix. Some things are closing down and some things are just opening up. Some things are being reclassified that we were able to read years ago and some things are still being newly declassified. It's Russia. So just about

everything you say about the archives is true; it's just they're a bundle of contradictions.

But, and this is the final point I'll make on this question, there is an enormous amount of research in history being published in the Russian language. When I first started this game many years ago now, of every 10 books that I read in my field, probably nine were in English, French, or German, and one was in Russian. Now it's exactly the reverse. The history that's being produced in the Russian language based upon original research is huge now. It's like a conveyor belt, and I can barely keep up, even though I do this for a living. This is what I do full-time.

And so this volume point is hard for people to understand. There are many things I'd like to see that they still haven't shown me, but I'm going to be persistent and maybe get to see them. But there are many things sitting for me to see, to get to, that I haven't gotten to yet because it's just so overwhelming, the material.

MR. TALBOTT: Is it pretty good history on the whole or are there Russian historians in Russia who are writing stuff that you respect intellectually?

MR. KOTKIN: Yes. Yes. There are two kinds. One is sort of straightforward empiricist type where they don't take a position necessarily for or against but they do really good empirical research in the primary documents, and you're able to understand because they quote the primary documents at length. That's very valuable and it's very substantial. The Institute of History, for example -- the Institute of Russian History, for example, has a number of excellent researchers and a lot of other places do, too.

Then there's another very substantial stream of this which comes out of the conservative nationalist historiography. They're motivated to write the history for that very reason, and they produce conservative national history, but often it's also very, very valuable. I mean, you know their interpretation, you know their take on it, but it's no less -

- it's no more debilitating to read that than it is to read the American liberal historiography on Russia. I mean, that has a slant, too. So if you're a real historian, you make it through the slant and you get -- it's great stuff that's coming out there. Now, there's junk history, there's popular history, there's a lot of stuff that isn't well sourced, and there's fake documentation. Every once in a while you'll get various diaries, for example, will get published, which don't exist but are best sellers. There's a commercial aspect to this. There are documents for sale on the market that are not real. You know, but they're trying to sell them to institutions that collect historical documents. So you have to be careful but it's great stuff.

MR. TALBOTT: With apologies. Going back to the testament, isn't it possible that Stalin was in a position of absolute power long enough and knew how the system worked that he could have obliterated whatever documents there may have been?

MR. KOTKIN: It's possible. It's very hard to say that that would be impossible. However, Stalin kept a lot of things. He kept a lot of things that, for example, I wouldn't have kept, that don't show him in a very good light. And so, you know, it's possible that there was an original shorthand that was in his archive, but there's not even a typescript of Lenin's testament in Stalin's archive. There's nothing. Usually, you go in there and you find a document and there's his blue pencil on it. Sometimes he does red pencil. It's not clear to me whether there's a mood attached to the blue versus the red. Sometimes he'll write seven, eight pages longhand in red pencil and you're thinking, was he angry? Was he irate? Or was just the red pencil the one he grabbed off the desk?

So, in the end, you know, it's tricky, and you certainly have to be careful with definitive statements. One of the things I do in the book is not to speculate, not to make definitive statements when the documentation isn't there, and not to fill in what I

think independent of the documentation to go beyond it. The reader is allowed to do that. The reader can look at the evidence I present and say, well, you know, maybe he destroyed it. He had the ability to do X, Y, and Z as I show in the book, and so that certainly can't be ruled out. But when you go through the documentation that he kept and that others kept on his behalf, you see that he was not anticipating that this regime would fall and that this stuff would be revealed. And so he kept an unbelievable amount of damning -- the lists that he signed for the executions, that number in the tens of thousands, the lists alone, probably a million people died for execution or torture under interrogation in 1937 and 1938. Those lists are in the archive in his hand. So, I mean, if you're keeping that -- anyway.

MR. TALBOTT: If you could bring a mic down to Fiona. All this talk about archives just makes her want to tell a war story or two.

MS. HILL: No, this is very good, Steve. And Marvin and I were marveling about what the trilogy of books is going to look like. We'll have to have a separate reinforced table by the time you finish.

So I want to ask you about something that might end up in a next volume because you've spoken brilliantly about the context in Russia itself, the Russian empire, and I'm wondering how much Stalin really knew or read about the outside world, because one of the things you're talking about the histories is what's remarkable about Russian histories is they're all about Russia. And it's very hard to find the Steve Kotkin equivalent in Russia writing about the outside world with quite as much depth.

So I'm wondering, and if based on everything that you've collected from the Stalin paraphernalia, what was Stalin reading about the outside world, and how well do you think he understood things? Because, of course, there's the notorious story, the other one, about how he totally misread Hitler and apparently lay on his couch. Maybe

he didn't.

MR. TALBOTT: I thought he got it all from the movies that he showed every night starting at 2 o'clock in the morning.

MS. HILL: That's right. So how did he interpret the outside world and what kind of sense have you got of that?

MR. KOTKIN: Yes, it's an excellent question. Once again, a complicated answer would be necessary to do it justice. But just a sort of simplified brief version of it. So this is going to evolve over time. The more Stalin is running the dictatorship, the hungrier he becomes for reading about how to be a ruler. And by his fifties and into his sixties, he's reading Roman history -- you know, ancient Roman history to try to figure this stuff out.

So he's well-versed in Russian imperial history, constantly reading that from an early age. He's reading Georgian history from an early age, also which never ceases. But then he begins to layer in the French history stuff, European Continental diplomacy, biographies of great figures, Taliran, Bismarck, and then eventually the Roman emperors, the Roman dictators if you want to call them, becomes an important part of his reading. And so there's a self-consciousness on his part to actually learn what a ruler ought to know. He has many difficulties, however. He can't figure out -- he never gets a textbook in Marxist political economy. Try and try again to write, you know, the Stalin short-course history of the Menshevik Party, that's managed, but the political economy text is a failure all the way through the end of his life.

So on the one hand he's reading up on the outside world through Russian translations as well as Russian produced history, some from the Czarist period. And on the other hand he's a blankard ideology who has trouble with nonclass-based analysis of the way things were. So you can't say that he well understands the outside

world, but you can't say he's got no understanding of it. He's got both deep insights and a kind of Marxist intellectual straightjacket that he never really gives up, and that's simultaneous with him.

You know, trying to understand Hitler, trying to figure out what's happening with Hitler. I have a chapter on the intelligence question, volume two, which this volume, volume one, covers the years, you know, 1870s to 1928. Then volume covers 1929 to 1941, and that's where you begin to see the answer to some of the questions you're asking. But then, of course, he gets old and he gets tired and he gets sick. The war has a really negative effect on his health and he's the same man from 1941 to 1953 when he dies. He's not the kind of guy who ran a dictatorship day-to-day operations the way he did in the '30s. And he just can't handle -- his days aren't like that anymore. He's exhausted from running the dictatorship. There are letters. He's asking for a holiday. He's pleading for a holiday. But he's pleading with himself because he's the one going to grant the holiday. But he can't go because everything depends on him. That's the system he's created.

MR. TALBOTT: This was a very good move here by the way, putting this up like this. Clearly an author --

MR. KOTKIN: May I be forgiven for that?

MR. TALBOTT: Absolutely.

Yes, sir? And then maybe keep the mic for the person --

MR. SHORE: My name is Stephen Shore. Your book ends with Trotsky taking off the chessboard.

MR. KOTKIN: Yes.

MR. SHORE: Now, most chess players are happy to remove a piece from the board but very few proceed to annihilate the piece. So what was his thinking of

the necessity of executing Trotsky?

MR. KOTKIN: Yeah. So one of the arguments I make in the book is that Stalin and Trotsky defined themselves vis-à-vis the other. Their rivalry goes back pretty far, and they're constantly competing for Lenin's favor at the other's expense. And then when Lenin is out of the picture, obviously, Stalin has the upper hand. Institutional power that Trotsky never really has. And so it's an unfair fight, but nonetheless, they're both fighting as if the other one is the opposite of what they are. Stalin is able to triumph over Trotsky, and then you would think he'd be done with Trotsky. But instead, Stalin -- Trotsky looms very large in Stalin's mind and Stalin makes Trotsky very large in the country after Trotsky's failure. That's a story of volume two where I go through where the terror comes from, where the destruction of the Soviet elite by Stalin, which is a gratuitous act of violence not necessitated by any objective circumstances. And he brings Trotsky back, as it were, in a way that Trotsky becomes the defining element of the whole regime and the regime's relationship to the outside world. No longer a defining element in Stalin's personality but much bigger than that. That's kind of too big a story to answer right here, but you're right, that that really is an extremely big, important question in Trotsky's story.

MR. TALBOTT: Your neighbor there.

MS. BOLAN: My name is Avis Bolan. I'm retired State Department.

When you read later descriptions of Stalin, two elements that I'm curious about whether they -- two characteristics, whether they surface in this earlier period. One is the extreme suspiciousness. I mean, the person that you've painted so far is somebody who is, give or take, a little bit much like his other colleagues. And the other is when you read about the wartime conferences, he obviously has -- is capable of exerting considerable personal charm. And do these come through in the early period?

MR. KOTKIN: Yeah. Both of those are correct. The longstanding view of his hyper suspiciousness and the longstanding view of him having charm, those are very well documented; multiple sources and over the course of his life.

On the suspiciousness question, just to give a little bit more flavor for it, one of the things we see is that the Bolshevik regime has encircled itself by capitalism. That is to say by doing a coup in the Russian empire, they're created a communist regime inside a capitalist world. They are now encircled. They've self-encircled. And this leads to a kind of structural paranoia in the regime. Stalin's personal paranoia, once again, can't be understood outside the paranoia of the regime itself.

Now, people have personalities, and Stalin's personality is different from Lenin's, it's different from Zenobia's, it's different from Trotsky's. So he intensifies the structural paranoia. Instead of overcoming it, instead of tamping it down a little bit, his personality and the regime's condition become mutually reinforcing. Once again, that's part of the argument about how politics is producing Stalin's personal characteristics, not solely or primarily the other way around.

On the charm, he's definitely a people person. He's very attentive to people. I think this is something -- I think you'll forgive me for this -- but that he shares with Putin as well. He's a psychologist. He sizes people up. He sees their vulnerabilities. He understands the levers he might have over them. Now, he's mean-spirited. He's vindictive. He's gratuitously violent. He's an evil, horrible person. At the same time, he can turn the charm on and he gets a lot of people to follow him because they are charmed by their short meeting with him or by their fact that they imagine he's watching over them. So he uses the ability to charm for regime purposes as well. It becomes an empowering lever he has that enhances the power of his dictatorship and ultimately, the power of the country, unfortunately, for communist ends.

So the charm part is true. The suspiciousness part is true. And I can relate it to the structure of the regime and the nature of the regime.

MR. TALBOTT: The gentleman behind Ambassador Bolan. I'm sorry. You got yours already.

Fire away. And then pass it back.

MR. HURWITZ: I'm Elliott Hurwitz. I'm a former State Department, World Bank, and intelligence community person. And I visited the Stalin Museum in Gori, Georgia.

My question is not exactly on cantor to your presentation but in the Russian Federation we have a terrible demographic problem of alcoholism, tobacco use, short life span. Murray Fischbach and others have written extensively about this and I've studied it extensively.

To what extent does this leave the Russian Federation in the 21st Century? To what place does it leave the Russian Federation?

MR. TALBOTT: Particularly because the demographic ticking time bomb is affecting the Russian population, the ethnic Russian population.

MR. KOTKIN: Yes. So this is true up to the last two years. It's very important to look at the most recent demographic data. First of all, Russia is an immigrant country. Now, there are a lot of problems with an immigrant country. We understand this firsthand, and certainly there are specific problems to immigrants in the Russian case, and I don't envy a lot of the immigrants there. But the Russian population has been sustained by significant immigration, but also the last two years there has been natural growth. The life expectancy is now rising. It's over 70. And so whether this is sustained or not remains to be seen. But the trend of precipitous demographic decline has been arrested like everything else in that country.

MR. TALBOTT: Okay. The very patient gentleman there, right behind Avis.

SPEAKER: Steve, congratulations. Congratulations on your great book.

MR. TALBOTT: I'm sorry. I'm blinded by the lights here.

SPEAKER: Totally fascinating.

My question, I guess, would be at the same time a part of the ledger. In reading probably every biography that was written, I could never find an answer, but I think even though if you indulge me, it's probably the next volume, but you probably could speculate. And that is following Fiona's question. Stalin, the reader. What always fascinated me, among other things, is ultimately -- ultimately, his great taste. Of the seven -- you know, there were seven greats during that period. Pasternak, Hamatowa, Mandelstam, Grossman, Platoniff, and a couple of others -- and Shretayva when she came. She came back from immigration. And Bulgart. There are your seven. He killed -- you know, he killed Piranak, he killed Badaman, that's fine. But of the seven grades -- of the seven grades, none was -- I mean, he arrested their sons, like with Platoniff. He sent their mistresses, like Pasternak's to Gulag, and so and so. He did not touch them.

Now, what have you learned about this? I mean, of course, he wrote poetry in Georgia as a young man. You know, there's this famous phone call to Pasternak about is he a master? Is he a master? Is he a master? Tell me. And of course, with Mandelstam, you know, is a possible exception. But my goodness, he wrote the kind of verse for which you could be shot right out of your apartment, and Stalin exiled him to Veronish. In the end, he did have to send him to the Gulag but for five years I didn't even know they gave five years in 1938.

So did he really -- my sense is, Steve, did he really at that time -- and you mentioned something to that effect. Towards the end of the 1930s, did he feel that

he was a Russian czar and he has to harbor the jewels and the crown, including art, including those grades? Thank you.

MR. KOTKIN: Thank you, Leon, for that question.

Yes, the answer is yes. So the Grand Kremlin Palace, which is the residence of the czars when they're in Moscow. The capital of the czars is obviously St. Petersburg. There is still the Kremlin in Moscow, and they built something called the Grand Kremlin Palace in the 1840s, which is the residence of the czars, and this is going to be inherited by the Soviets, this fantastic space which is still there. Gilded halls, magnificent; right? Some people had apartments in the Grand Kremlin Palace. Stalin didn't. Stalin's apartment was initially in the (inaudible), the amusement palace, the only Boyar residence, 17th Century Boyar residence that comes down to us. Arikov lived in the same building, although he didn't socialize with Stalin. That's where Stalin's second wife committed suicide in the (inaudible) and Stalin eventually will move to a Kremlin apartment below his office but he doesn't actually live there. He lives in the (inaudible) which he has constructed for himself.

But the Grand Kremlin Palace is in many ways the heart of the regime because Stalin mobilizes culture on behalf of the regime, and they have tremendous numbers of performances there in which the evening starts at 9:00 p.m. and it goes till 9:00 a.m., and Stalin is there the whole time. And they have one performer after another -- dancers, singers, musicians. He'll have the Azerbaijani folk musician brought in to perform for him. And he'll sit there throughout the entire concert and then ask for more. The rest of the hall is full of drunken, half literate, you know, Soviet officers in the Red Army and KVD that is secret police officials. They're drunk out of their minds. They don't know anything about music, et cetera. Stalin is sitting there. He calls the performers up to the head table. He'll dance with them if they're women who are dancers. He'll kiss

their hands. He'll ask them for a special extra skit. There's performance art. Arkadi Riken, the famous performance artist as a young man performing in the Kremlin, and this then extends to the novelists because in addition to music, Stalin was partisan to the written word. It's no longer the case in Russia that the written word quite means the same thing that it used to mean, but as you know, the written word had extraordinary power and Stalin appreciated that and he cultivated that. I wouldn't say that in all aesthetic issues his judgment was right on the ball. I wouldn't say that his line editing of certain novels made the novels better. But then again, those novels were often so bad, I don't know what you could have done with them.

The films, the same way. Editing scenes of the films. Sometimes he improved them, sometimes aesthetic judgment is mixed. But his appreciation of culture is very deep, and like Catherine the Great, culture is an integral part of the enlightened despotism as Stalin sees himself and he's mobilizing culture on behalf of the regime. And those around him, the others around him, don't have this sense. They can't really appreciate it to the same degree. I mean, Voroshilov and Mulotoff take tango lessons together, for example, dancing lessons, to be able to dance with their wives, and Voroshilov is also an opera singer and could, you know, he's not Chaliapin, but nonetheless, he can sing. And Voroshilov's apartment is also where they go for the celebrations because Voroshilov, unlike Stalin, had an apartment in the Grand Kremlin Palace. Demyan Bedney Pridvorov, the poet, had an apartment in the Grand Kremlin Palace, but Stalin evicted him. Stalin's body guards had one but in the maid's room. Yarzensky lived in the Grand Kremlin Palace but also in the maid's room because he was an Hasidic. Voroshilov lived in a splendid Grand Kremlin Palace apartment, and Stalin and Voroshilov often sang in the evenings after a little bit of drinking and eating inside the apartment, and then they would go upstairs for the performance in the gilded halls where

the Putin regime, where the Yeltsin regime also had many receptions, both for foreign guests and for themselves. I've been in these halls; it's just spectacular some of the rooms. Ribbentrop was treated to a reception there. He climbed the stairs. He saw the big paintings.

But anyway, yeah, you're right, Leon, he understands the culture. As important, both in and of itself as a high value and as important for the regime's legitimacy and its power.

MR. TALBOTT: Listen, I wish we could go on until 9 o'clock tonight, or for that matter, 9 o'clock tomorrow morning, but here's the good news. The good news is this is the first of three visits that Stephen is going to make. He's already got his manuscript for volume two. It'll be out in a couple of years. Please come back. We'll extend it to two hours. And all of you, I trust that this is, if you haven't already bought, and better yet, even read the book, this is a big incentive to do so. And Stephen, thank you very, very much.

MR. KOTKIN: Thank you, Strobe.

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