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TRANSCRIPT

"STALIN/PUTIN: GEOPOLITICS, POWER, IDEAS"

A Conversation With Stephen Kotkin and Bill Keller

Moderator: Leonard Benardo

ANNOUNCER:

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LEONARD BENARDO:

It's a pleasure to be able to have-- Steve Kotkin and-- and Bill Keller here at the Open Society Foundations. I forgot to bring my copy of Stephen's book that he gave to me in-- in galley form that I have upstairs. I'm sure most of you know that it's-- it's a tome to beat all tomes. But it's only the first tome of three tomes (LAUGH) on-- on Stalin.

In fact, I was with Stephen very shortly after he received the contract. And at that point, it was just gonna be a one volume exercise. Little did we know it was gonna turn into-- a trilogy. Very much akin to the great Isaac Deutscher's trilogy-- on-- on-- on Trotsky. But, of course, not from the same-- ideological vantage point, I imagine.

But-- but Stephen's book-- is now out. And-- and we're thrilled to have the opportunity to be with him. As you know, St-- Steve is-- is a professor of history at-- at Princeton. And to have Bill Keller-- as Stephen's interlocutor. Bill is currently the editor-in-chief of-- of the Marshall Project, which is a non-profit startup working on stories around the U.S. criminal justice system. And was executive editor for a number of years at *The New York Times*. And was the bureau chief in Moscow-- when Stephen was doing some research there.

And-- and-- and their paths intersected. And we want to thank Bill, who's just down the block, as I found out, at the Marshall Project. But thank him very much for-- for

being here. Bill and Steve are gonna speak for maybe 30-40 minutes or so, in conversation, both about-- Stephen's first volume on Stalin, but as well about the relationship, as you saw, in the-- invitation-- the kind of ideological, institutional relationship between Stalin and Putin, should it exist? And then we're gonna open it up for-- a broader conversation. So Bill, I turn it over to you.

BILL KELLER:

Before we get to the Q & A, I just want to say that I've been-- Steve and I have been friends for a long time. We-- both landed in the Soviet Union in the '80s. And we were among the-- prime beneficiaries of Mikhail Gorbachev. Steve, in-- in the respect that the whole generation, maybe two generations of historians who had preceded him-- had operated with the-- with the immense handicap-- and in some cases, had sort of stopped trying very hard. Because they couldn't get access not only to the country, but to the archives-- the-- the-- the Soviet archives.

And I came after at least a generation of journalists who saw their job resignedly as being-- reading between the lines of *Pravda* and seeing who was standing next to whom on Lenin's tomb during the parades. And we both arrived there at a time when it actually became possible to do scholarships and to do journalism. And-- I would say we both had a blast.

When I met Steve, he was-- encamped in the dormitory at Mgayu (PH), Moscow State University, which I can't imagine any-- of the other-- his predecessor historians-- would even have thought to attend. We crossed paths on one of my favorite field trips, when they started to let journalists travel, was to Magnitogorsk with a delegation of American steel industry types, who pointed out, without a lot of discretion, what an awful pit the-- the world's largest steel mill was.

And Steve later produced-- a really great book on Magnitogorsk as-- sort of embodiment of Stalinism in the Soviet economy. I got-- one thing that I found myself being curious about-- in reading the book was that Stalin was a true believer-- in your portrayal. And-- for those of us who were introduced to the Soviet Union-- in the time of Gorbachev-- you know, it was-- it-- very hard to imagine anybody believing in the doctrine, that it was so transparently failed. And-- most of the people that you talked to who profess to be devout Communists were completely cynical about it. And yet, somehow, this-- you know, Georgian man, nationalist, became a true believer in-- in Leninism. How did that happen?

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

(THROAT CLEARS) Yes, that-- that is really the great question, isn't it? First of all, let me thank O.S.F. for the invitation. Thank Lenny for the introduction. Thank Bill for agreeing to be here. I have to tell you that the food at your apartment was significantly better (LAUGH) than the food in the dormitory in 1986 and 1987.

(LAUGH)

Not that that had anything to do with the-- the frequency of my appearances (LAUGH) to your apartment. It was just a byproduct, so to speak, of the life I was leading. You know, so this book covers the-- the 1870s to 1928 and is actually about the decision for collectivization. The decision for collectivization and the fact that it carried collectivization through is in many ways the core aspect of their 20th century history.

It's the core criminal act of the regime, which was a criminal regime. But nonetheless, it could get worse. And it did. And it, in many ways, destroyed the country for generations, even though it-- they did build a superpower there. There was this enslaved peasantry, a hundred million peasants.

And so how did that happen? And why did that happen? Why would somebody want to do that, enslave their own peasantry in what were called collective farms, as well as state farms? And how could they manage to actually carry out something like that? Where could that-- how could that be possible?

So, you know, the-- there's a second volume, as Lenny mentioned, which covers the-- the great terror and the pact and then war with Hitler, the onset of the war with Hitler. And those are obviously really important questions. Why did Stalin murder-- large numbers of his own elites? And what was he actually thinking in the foreign policy? And did he understand fascism? And did he understand what he was doing with Hitler or not? Did he believe or not believe the intelligence on the eve of the attack?

There's a third volume, which is about-- carrying out of the World War II, where the victory could have possibly come from in such a war. The Cold War, the various miscalculations. And, of course, the rise of Mao. The third volume is subtitled *The Mao Eclipse*. And the second volume is entitled *Waiting For Hitler*. And in many ways, you have a sort of Trotsky, Hitler, Mao-- foil working here, in volumes one, two, and three.

Tito is also an important figure for Stalin, but nothing on the level of Mao, by any means. And-- Trotsky is a figure in both volume one and volume two. Volume two covering 1929 to '41, but more of a shadow, a manipulated shadow figure in volume two. Hitler is the actual antagonist, protagonist or nemesis in volume two. So, you know, I'll get back to the-- this collectivization. Where does that come from? Why does he do it? How does he do it? And-- set in in the context of the larger structures.

So previously I think we had an understanding either that it was necessary to do it, because this is just how peasant countries modernize. You know, it's a terrible thing, but in order to compete in the international system, in order to industrialize, you kind of just have to do this. And there was supposed benefits from it, accruing to industrialization and-- et cetera. Well, there actually were no Ben-- there was no net contribution of collectivization to industrialization and the costs were much greater than any benefits that were extracted agriculturally. So--

(OVERTALK)

BILL KELLER:

And that became obvious-- relatively early in the-- in the-- in the process.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Those who lived through it understood that was the case. They lost all those people. And they lost all that livestock, property. But nonetheless, in the treatment of it, it remained and it still remains to this day in many textbooks a core argument that it was necessary to modernize a peasant country.

So that was one side of a existing argument. And on the other side of the existing argument was that-- Stalin did this for instrumental reasons. In other words, he was accruing power, had a series of manipulative alliances, first with Kamenev and Zinoviev against Trotsky, then with Bukharin against Kamenev and Zinoviev, and then against Bukharin and others.

And so collectivization was, in many ways, about his personal power. It was how he overcame the final coalition that he was semi dependent upon, supposedly. And fully consolidated his personal dictatorship, because those he pushed collectivization against were supposedly the last obstacle to his absolutism, absolute power. So there are a couple of other explanations that existed in the literature before. And there were more nuanced versions of the ones I just presented that if we had more time, we'd go into details.

But it struck me that that was insufficient, that there were-- it was a bigger story. The bigger story had to do with what was tried by the Czarist government, vis-à-vis the peasantry beforehand. So the book contains a chapter on Stolypin, for example, and the Stolypin reforms, which were enormously successful economically, but a failure politically. The R-- Russian autocracy never achieved the level of-- parliamentary functionality, even that Wilhelm mein Germany achieved under Bismarck and his successors.

So Stolypin was politically handicapped, even before he was assassinated. But nonetheless, he had tried a certain program-- of transformation of the peasantry, which was seen as a key to Russia's ability to modernize and compete in the international system, right? So there was that. And-- we added that story in the book fully, well-known story, differences of opinion about and interpretations of it. I went through the literature carefully and offered, I think, a synthesis of the interpretation most plausible to me. But that was-- even that wasn't enough yet.

And it turned out that the more you looked at the secret documents, right, the single most important fact of the formerly classified documents is that the Communists, behind the scenes, used the same language, spoke the same way as they did in public. Communist propaganda and Communist secret documents have the same categories of thought, the same types of analyses, the same way of thinking.

Now you-- you can argue that, (THROAT CLEARS) you know, you still have to be

careful with the secret documents. And you can't always take everything at face value. And, of course, that's true. And it's true for any historical analysis, right? But nonetheless, it's very important that these people were Communists. There's no question that they were.

That's how they saw themselves. And that's how they communicated with each other in the most secret possible venues, when they were not thinking it was gonna be recorded and kept for all time necessarily. It was certainly not gonna be revealed to the public. And so you have this problem that they're Communists. So then the question, push back a little bit, how did he become a Communist? Which is where you started. So forgive me, I went a little bit farther around to get to your point.

BILL KELLER:

No, it's-- it's a great detour.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

So here we have a guy who is-- born on the periphery of an empire. But there is opportunity where he's born. That opportunity comes from the church, comes from the parish school, and it comes from the seminary in the capital of the Caucuses, Tiflis, right? Often we hear that Stalin was born in a backwater. Well, yes, certainly compared to 57th Street it was a bit of a backwater. But there was opportunity for those who were strivers and diligent.

And so because of that church, the church brought many things, not only opportunity. But because of the church, there was educational opportunity, which he took advantage of. And he was an excellent student. We have good recommend-- records, documentation on his student days. He's an excellent student. And he got into the Tiflis seminar, there-- the Czar's regime did not permit a university in the Caucuses. And therefore, the seminary and the gymnasium (?) were the highest level educational institutions. And he was in one of them.

And he also excelled his first two years at the-- at the seminary. Equivalent for us of something like high school. But a slightly higher level. And it-- it was conceivable (not necessarily automatic or even likely) it was conceivable that he could have gone on to university elsewhere in the empire, having completed seminary studies. It wasn't easy, but it was possible.

But nonetheless, he was a success in the society. He was teacher's pet. He sung in the choir. And it was clear that he would find a niche in this society, whether he was gonna be a priest or not-- was-- was unclear. But even if he decided not to be a priest, he could expect to s-- succeed on the basis of his education and his success in the classroom. But he gave all that up. He gave it up. And he entered a life of the underground, arrests, prison, and exile, for almost 17 years. He had-- briefly had-- a legitimate job as a weatherman in Tiflis. He recorded the temperature at the

observatory. That was the only legal job he really had in his life prior--

BILL KELLER:

He was a meteorolig-- meteorologist?

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Yes, until he became dictator, (LAUGH) that was really his only-- on his resume, that was it. But he-- as I say, he risked a life of arrest, imprisonment, and the underground, giving up the success in school and the life path that he was on-- for the cause of social justice. There's no doubt that, you know, young people are often drawn to-- causes, maybe less in some cultures than in others. But--

BILL KELLER:

What-- what would he have seen or experienced that would have drawn him into the cause of social justice?

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Well, the Czarist regime was-- one of the most oppressive regimes on the planet. And so politics were illegal. And this is why the Bolshevik underground was underground. This is why people threw bombs partly. Because legitimate political participation was outlawed. And so the-- if you wanted to agitate for social justice, if you stood for social justice, the means that you could employ were illegal means, because regular politics, as I said, were illegal.

So he got involved in underground campaigning for what he believed is social justice in response to the deep oppressive nature of Czarism. He wasn't the only one. Obviously, many young people did that. But not every young person did that. Many young people were content to continue on a career path and eventually achieve a standing in the oppressive Czarist society, maybe change it from within whatever ideas they might have had. Maybe they were conservative and didn't want to change it.

But nonetheless, he was committed to this from an early age. There was a mentor who attracted him into this named Laro Ketsoveli (PH), a fellow Georgian. And-- however, it was a life of sacrifice. There's no doubt it was a life of sacrifice. He did not have a salary. He was impoverished, begging everybody he knew for money. He lived in faraway places in exile. You can romanticize revolutionary underground. And certainly, the literature of the revolutionary movement romanticizes the underground and certainly the historical profession has made its contribution to

romanticizing the underground. But it's not a life that-- is-- is that romantic.

Being in prison, having difficulty obtaining something to read, you know, subscribing to a periodical that maybe comes, if the boat doesn't sink in the river, you know, every six months or ev-- every 12 months. Escaping from exile, fleeing and-- and trying to evade the police and getting rearrested, because a large number of the people in the underground are actually Czarist secret agents, et cetera.

This is the life he led. And it was not a very-- attractive and romantic life, as been portrayed. But it was the life he chose, because he was struggling for social justice. Now he then would meet Lenin. And Lenin would be his ticket to power, because Lenin was a singular individual. The image that we have of Lenin, the existing image that we have of Lenin is a correct one. That he was-- a man of tremendous willpower, energy, zealotry, and tactical flexibility, of-- extremely effective in those circumstances.

Maybe he wouldn't be able to run a General Electric today. That wasn't where his skill set was. But if you were going to take an-- a ragtag group of people and seize power in the Czarist empire, during a war that destroyed the old order, he would be your guide. There's no question.

BILL KELLER:

He could be a Big Ten football coach? (LAUGH)

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

That's a thought actually. (LAUGH) That's a thought.

BILL KELLER:

Talk a little bit about the character of Stalin, because, I mean-- it's-- it-- I think one of the contributions of this book is that, you know, it's very easy to make him into a two-dimensional monster. And he-- I-- I expect by the time the trilogy is through, nobody's gonna doubt that he's a monster. But he's a complicated, interesting monster. And you clearly believe that at least in Stalin's case, one individual in power can make a difference in history. So his character matters as more than just-- an interesting profile.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Yes. I don't think without his commitment to Marxism/Leninism or his incredible willpower you get collectivization. I think there are many co-- contributing factors here to the person he is and to the circumstances of 1928 when the decision for

collectivization is made. But I don't think you can explain that without the Marxism/Leninism, without the ideology, without the ideas, nor do I think there are other people capable of pushing that through to the end, through famine, through the destruction of the livestock. More than half the country's livestock is lost. Five to seven million people die in a famine. And the regime is destabilized. His own personal dictatorship is actually destabilized by collectivization--

(OVERTALK)

BILL KELLER:

But Steve, can I just-- can I just-- just jump in on the w-- one point. I guess what surprises me knowing your work and you over the years is the rather intense focus you have for Stalin on sort of Communist literature. Because everything I know about you and your work, it's all about sort of larger structures, institutions, power relationships. You dedicated your first book to your teacher, Michel Foucault. And I was-- I'm-- I'm just struck by how you now have reexamined Stalin through-- a very different-- methodological lens.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Yeah. You know-- that's an important question, so just let me take that and then get back to where we are in the character. You know, so I have the same analysis now that I had before in *Magnetic Mountain*. There was a misreading of *Magnetic Mountain* by people who do cultural studies and emphasize one chapter out of the book, which I regard as an important chapter, where I coin the term "speaking Bolshevik." But that's certainly not the sole aspect of the analysis.

The analysis of that book, as of this book, is three parts. One, geopolitics and how states must compete in the brutal, unsentimental international order. And that if you cannot compete, some other state will show up at your door and tell you how to live and maybe even take over your country. And so this is-- you know, they have steel. Do you have steel?

They have ships. Do you have ships? They have an officer corps that's trained a certain way. Do you have an officer corps that-- they have engineers. Do you have engineers, right? They have mass politics, where the-- the masses are incorporated into the polity. Do you have that? And so you have-- a set of attributes that's sometimes called modernization or modernity. But that's a geopolitical question.

That's not a natural process that happens. That happens because of state to state co-- competition. The British can do certain things. And if you can't do those things yourself, you're gonna fall under British rule directly or indirectly, right? And so the Magnitogorsk story was also about Russia's place in the world and the ability of the Soviet Union to compete in the international system.

That was the single-- that was the beginning factor and the single most important

factor. And that's also true of *Armageddon Averted* and it's also true of the Stalin book. The second piece of the analysis is about institutions and how institutions function. And institutions are-- obviously, very complex, like you said. And they're not just bureaucracies. They're also ways of looking at the world or self definition or others defining you.

And that piece of analysis is in there. And it's in here too. I give an analysis of how the state is destroyed in World War I, in the revolutionary process. And the state is rebuilt in the revolutionary process and civil war. And that rebuilding, that institution building, which is a significant part of this book, was also true of *Magnetic Mountain*, when they built a showcase version of Stalinism from the ground up, in an empty space, right?

And then the third piece, if it's geopolitics, it's institutions, the third piece is ideas, ideology, ways of thinking, right? And that was true of *Magnetic Mountain*. And it's true of this book too. So this book gives you the geopolitics story. It gives you the institutional story. And then there are choices. There are choices available for the actors.

Most people, politicians, when they want to make choices, they cannot get their choices implemented. They'd like to do policy X. They'd like to do policy Y. But they're constrained. They don't have the ability, the wherewithal, the capacity, the coalition, right, or the motivations, or the ability to cut their enemies down to size, right?

There's all sorts of ways in which they're stymied. Now the decisions, the menu of options that they have, the landscape of possibilities is not determined solely by the ideas. It's determined by the geopolitics and by the institutional structure. You give me a regime that's not a dictatorship, but that is instead a parliamentary order. And there are different options in front of that regime, policy wise, as well as different methods.

So we don't want to attribute everything to ideas. Obviously not. And that would be foolish. But I don't know how you do it without the ideas. I don't know how geopolitics and institutions alone give you collectivization. You look at the discussions that they're having. And all the discussions are about kulaks. That's all they talk about.

They're behind the scenes. They're fighting it out. "Kulaks this, kulaks that. How many kulaks do we have? What percentage of the population are kulaks? If you have three cows, are you a kulak? If you have three cows and work hard and then acquire up to six cows, are you a kulak?" Right? These are the secret documents, the internal documents of the regime.

And Stalin goes back to his office. And this is what they talk about when the meeting is over. You know? That is to say they want the harvest. They want a bigger harvest. They want more grain. Because they need the grain for geopolitical reasons. They have to ship the grain abroad, export it to acquire foreign currency, right? To buy industrial equipment. There's a whole bunch of reasons why they need more grain.

BILL KELLER:

But in this sense, it's not-- it's not the Communist liturgy, per se. They're actually making on the spot decisions and creating a whole narrative framework for themselves to justify actions they believe, rightly or wrongly, they need to take.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

You know, very few regimes in history destroy their most productive people. It just doesn't happen that often (UNINTEL). Most regimes in history are gonna do a deal with their most productive people. They're gonna look at big business. They're gonna look at the merchant class. They'll look at the better off peasants and want them to succeed and want them to be lashed to the regime, right?

One of the arguments about fascism we've had for many years and about Nazism, as well, is the extent to which big business was in partnership with the fascist and the Nazi regime, right? And I think that's-- exactly a good argument to be having of the extent to which business supported or didn't support, right? But there's no argument that fascism and Nazism went out to destroy these people.

It said, "You know? You're makin' too much money. You have too many cows. You're g-- you're-- you're selling your goods on the market for too much. There's too much profit." Right? This is what the Communists are discussing. Now you can argue that they're discussing this because they're in a geopolitical-- box. And they can't get out of the geopolitical box. And they don't have too many options. Because when they seize power in 1917, they've surrounded themselves with capitalists, right?

They-- the capitalist encirclement happens in October 1917, when an avowedly Socialist regime seizes power in the Czarist empire and holds that power. That's capitalist encirclement. And so they're encircled. And you can argue, therefore, they're in this box. Whoever put them in the box, they put themselves in the box, in my view, but if you-- want to argue that others put them in the box, fine. They're in the box.

But you don't then go destroy the people who are producing the harvest or who are raising G.D.P. You only do that, in my view, if you have an anti-capitalist ideology. There's no way to explain getting rid of your productive people. I mean, they lose half the harvest almost in the early years of collectivization. The harvest declines. They lose more than half the livestock. Why would you do that? Because you're stupid, potentially? Okay, fine, people make mistakes. And there's a lot of erroneous policy. But there's no way to explain that, even if you put stupidity in the mix, without a commitment to anti-capitalism. That's who these people are. That's how they talk. And that's how they act.

Now the debate is not about capitalism or anti-capitalism. The 1920s debate in the Soviet Union, which will culminate in Stalin's decision to collectivize and his ability to implement collectivization is a debate about not principles, yes or no, but as a

debate about when. Because the others on the other side of the debate from Stalin, who are also anti-capitalist and in favor of Socialism in the countryside, as well as in the city.

They argue that it will be destabilizing to do this. If we collectivize now, it can only be using force. And they're correct about that. 1% of the arable land is farmed collectively in 1928. And the average size collective farm is 16 to 17 peasants. 16 to 17 peasant households. And so there is no voluntary collectivization. 1% of the arable land in 1928.

And they say you can only do it by using mass violence. And if you use mass violence, you will destabilize everything. You won't get collectivization. And you'll destroy the recovery that the new economic policy of the 1920s has produced. And they argue this to Stalin not, "We're in favor of kulaks. We're in favor of market relations in the countryside." Not a single highly placed member of the central committee ever comes out in favor of capitalism in the countryside in the 1920s, with the partial exception of Grigori Sokolnikov, the finance minister, who is a major figure in this book for this very reason.

So they're against kulaks. They're against the market. They're against capitalism. But they're worried about destabilization. And it's not Bukharin, Nikolai Bukharin, it's Alexei Rykov who's actually the second most important person in the regime and a very significant figure. 'Cause he's-- he's the head of the government, Lenin's position. Stalin, of course, is head of the party. Rykov stands up--

BILL KELLER:

Stephen--

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

--and he says this (UNINTEL). He says, "If you do this, it'll be catastrophic. And we're against this." And Stalin figures out a way to implement it anyway, even-- against the objections of people like Rykov (UNINTEL). He then implements it. And what happens? Rykov was exactly right. It was a complete catastrophe.

The-- the mass collectivization, which can only be done violently, has destroyed the country. It's destroyed the-- agriculture and the livestock. And it's destabilized the regime. Rykov is correct. But Stalin, through the destabilization, through the destruction, through everything that Rykov predicted (and much worse than what Rykov predicted, including this colossal famine, the second famine that this regime has had, in-- in a short period of time) Stalin goes all the way through.

And the reason he goes all the way through is not because he's tryin' to consolidate a personal dictatorship like the old literature argued. Not because he's trying to use the resources of agriculture to contribute to industrialization, because he's losing the resources in this process. It's because he's anti-capitalism. And he tells them, "I have

the courage of my convictions. And you don't. You're talkin' to me about how we can't do this now. And I'm talkin' to you about how we have to do this now."

So you-- we can argue about this forever. My argument is simple. Without the ideas, you cannot explain this. The ideas alone do not explain this. You need the geopolitics. You need the institutions. You need to talk about a lot of other stuff. There's international price of commodities. There's all sorts of things in this book. But if you leave the ideas out, you can't explain this story.

Now that gets to your character question. Where does that willpower come from? Where does that combination, not just of adherence to certain ideas, which he believes are for promoting social justice, and also the willpower come from? Where does this character come from? And so we'll back up a tiny bit and-- I won't go too-- too far on this. But just to get some insight.

So you gotta be careful with reductive psychology, right? If-- if you read a biography of Picasso or of some great novelist or a poet (and these people produce transcendent art, unbelievable art, not your average run of the mill stuff, but things which are amazing through time and across cultures.) You pick the novelist where's your favorite. And I'll use that as the transcendent art that we're talking about.

And then you come and you read a biography. And the biography's about their mother and the relationship they had with the mother. Or it's about their father. Or it's about their mistress. Or it's about something else along those lines, about how they were slighted by a teacher in school or whatever it might be. And you say to yourself, "Y-- that can't be. How could it be that, you know, I had a relationship with my mother that was complicated. But I didn't produce any transcendent art. That can't be--"

BILL KELLER:

And you didn't become--

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

"--the explanation."

BILL KELLER:

--a despot either. (LAUGH)

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

And I still haven't killed tens of millions of people. You know, so we have to be careful not to do the same thing for the politics side, right? 'Cause Stalin's

dictatorship, unfortunately, is a work of art. It's the kind of gold standard of amassing political power and exercising political power. Not in a moral sense. I don't share the political values. But in terms of the sheer power that's accumulated and exercised, it's a breathtaking work of art that he's created. And we don't want to reduce that to certain--

BILL KELLER:

Mother issues.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

--issues that (LAUGH) he might have had in his childhood or whatever. Let alone the fact that when you examine the documentary base of this childhood, it doesn't pan out. The stories are not well-documented. And a lot of the stuff is made up. It could have happened, but we-- we can't prove that his f-- we have-- almost no sources on his father beat him, for example. There more-- there's more documentation that my father beat me (LAUGH) than there is documentation that Stalin's father beat him. But even if the father beat him, that explains nothing.

BILL KELLER:

Where is that documentation? (LAUGH)

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Thank you for that one. But anyway, so-- to finish-- (LAUGH) to finish on the-- on the question of the character, though. So the character comes from the politics. That's who this guy's about. He's a political being. It comes from the underground struggle against Czarism. That's what this is about.

It's-- it's about fighting with-- extremist methods against an extremist regime. On behalf, as I said, of what he considers social justice. And it comes from forming this-- seizing power, forming this dictatorship, and then exercising power as a dictator. That makes him the person he is. When-- I'll t-- this is what I'll add on this question on character.

So when does Stalin become a dictator? Everybody asks me this question. And I thought, "That's a really good question. When does Stalin become a dictator?" And so in April 1922, he's appointed general secretary of the Communist Party. And Lenin has done this. He's created the position expressly for Stalin. Stalin is performing the functions. Lenin is the head of the government. Stalin will be the general secretary, as it were, the number two guy who will handle the day to day operations, personnel,

all sorts of-- important stuff, liaison with the military, liaison with the police.

Stalin performing these functions for Lenin already. Lenin decides to formalize this and create this special position. April 1922. May 1922, Lenin has a stroke. So how about if I appoint you number two and then the next month I have a stroke? What does that-- what does that mean? And it means that there's the potential for the personal dictatorship in spring 1922.

And the ability or the attempt to realize the personal dictatorship, to realize the potential, right, just by doing your job, just by being general secretary of the party, just by exercising that. And then he begins to exceed his job and do more than is necessary to do his job. He would have had to have been quite a wallflower not to take advantage of the situation that g-- thrown in his lap. (LAUGH)

And the reason he wins the succession struggle is not just because he's good, but he's in power. Trotsky is not in power. Stalin is in power from spring 1922. So he has to be removed from power if somebody else is gonna succeed Lenin. And this is what they don't quite understand. F-- finally, when does he become sociopathic? Okay, so I'm t-- I'm saying that the character comes from the politics, the commitment to the cause, which is deep and sincere, and the-- function of being a personal dictator, creating his personal dictatorship, right? That's where he gets his character, in my view.

But when is he a sociopath? Because this many people don't die without some sociopathic tendencies. And so I-- I thought, "That's a really hard question, too." Because let's face it-- you have a lot of reminiscences of the few people who survived and got into the immigration many years later about stuff that they recall 30 years ago that Stalin said or did.

"Oh, you know, when we were in school together, he was really this crazy guy. Look what he did." And that's much removed from the time that it happened. And it's also after he's become-- he's done the terror, right? And so I said, "Okay, I'll-- that's-- that's interesting. But let's not use that. Let's instead use the real-time commentary. The people around him." When did they begin to perceive that he was sociopathic? When did they start to think that he was a danger to the revolution and a danger to them personally? Those who worked with him on a day-to-day basis, who were right there inside the regime with him.

And I have various episodes, 1922, '23, '24, where they don't perceive this. Where they have the opportunity to remove him. He either resigns orally or in written form from his post of general secretary. And they don't accept his resignation. When the Lenin document comes forward, the-- alleged dictation from Lenin about "remove Stalin." And they don't act on that document. Comes forward in June 1923.

Now if this guy's a danger to you and you have the reality or the pretext of Lenin calling for his removal, even if you don't have any personal ambition (and they have plenty of personal ambition) but even if you don't have any personal ambition, if this guy's a danger, you're gonna act on Lenin's removal request and get this guy out of there. And they don't. None of them do. And so this is really important. The

sociopathic behavior is not visible to them early in the 19-- early 1920s.

So finding it in his childhood is-- is-- is an interesting exercise, since in adulthood-- I mean, in 1923, right, Stalin is 45 years old. And they don't-- they're with him every day, day to day basis. And they don't perceive this, you know? And so I'm not sure that we can extract the sociopathic stuff from the early years. I'm not saying we can't. Maybe somebody could analyze it better than me. And come up with the early stuff where this character comes out. But I think it comes later, through the battle with the testament and through-- having so much power and experiences. So-- so the-- so the character is a political animal. And it's a political animal in a personal dictatorship, which is a specific kind of power.

BILL KELLER:

Let me leap forward to the subsequent century. And ask this sort of obvious question that-- which is how much of Stalin or Stalinism do you see in Putin and in the Russian society writ large today?

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Yeah, so let's-- let's right away-- we-- we're not talking about a figure on the scale of Stalin, all right? Okay?

BILL KELLER:

Or a country on the scale of the-- the-- Russia and its (UNINTEL).

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

So we want to be careful not to make too many-- easy analogies here, because there aren't that many Stalins in world history to begin with, right? There's Mao, Hitler, I mean, it's a short list of people like, fortunately. Very consequential list, but-- so we wouldn't put anybody today, certainly not Putin on that same list.

But it-- there's an uncanny-- resonance to some of the history in the current behavior of the regime. So you have-- a country that-- is zealous about having a special mission in the world. That special mission changes over time. The content of the special mission is not consistent. But the idea that this is more than just a country, that this is maybe even a civilization, and that-- at-- at a very least, it needs to play a special or leading role in the world somehow, right?

This is a deep and fundamental characteristic of this place. Not everyone in Russia shares that view. There's opposition to that view, of course. It's not a monolithic culture, by any means. But it's a very strong current in there. And we see political

regimes constantly coming back to this special mission. "So integrate into wider Europe doesn't work, because we're special. And we're just not a regular European country like they are." Right?

We see many other aspects of this. But that's a big thing that we have now that's-- and-- and therefore, it's very hard for them to join things. It's very hard for them to be integrated into larger world structures. Because they can only be integrated into larger world structures if that special exceptional quality is there. They're not the only country that exhibits this, right? We see a version of this in China. We see a version of this right here in the U.S., right? We all see very substantial great powers having some special mission, special destiny.

BILL KELLER:

Exceptionalism.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Yes. And in-- in other cases, though, it hasn't precluded alliance systems or some forms of integration or-- exceeding to international law or whatever it might be, right? But in this case, it seems to come up against that, hit against that every time. So that's a very important thing to consider, right?

We-- we had this in the Cold War, too. Remember the Cold War historiography. "Stalin was mistreated. Stalin wanted to have a partnership. Stalin was humiliated. Stalin was cheated." And therefore, he had to invade his neighbors and take them over, right? And that's what the Cold War was about. So we have this with the Putin regime, too.

We have, "Oh, they were humiliated. Oh, they were mistreated. Oh, the settlement wasn't fair to them." So therefore, they had to invade their neighbors. Right? So we have to be careful with this, you know, Russia is humiliated, Russia is mistreated-- trope. That doesn't mean Russia's to blame for everything, by any means.

BILL KELLER:

It could also be true, but there's no causality.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

That-- that-- I do think the settlement is very unfair. But the international system is brutally unsentimental that way. The-- the 1991 settlement was extremely unfair. But, of course, it was unfair because of the Stalin regime and what it did and how it won World War II, but it lost the peace, you know? It was evicted on the same road

as Napoleon was evicted out of Russia, the S-- the Russian troops, the Soviet Army was evicted out of Europe, the other-- in the other direction, right?

So sure, the peace was unfair, but why was it unfair? And, you know, we could go into that. But yeah, okay, so we have that problem of on the one hand-- it's a special country. And on the other hand, it's mistreated and therefore has to invade its neighbors. The second piece we have that's uncanny aspect is they're constantly striving for a strong state. You hear the rhetoric that they want a strong state, they need a strong state, they're committed to a strong state. It mobilizes the populace.

There's a deep well of society-- identifying with the strong state idea. And then they build a personal regime. They push for the strong state. And they get a state that has weak institutions and instead if highly personalized. And so everything's-- is supposedly dependent on one person. And that one person-- becomes a bottleneck in the system, such that the-- the system becomes dysfunctional.

In other words, no single person can do all the things that one person is supposed to do in these personal regimes. You can't run foreign policy, run culture, run the economy, run personnel, et cetera. There's only 24 hours in a day. Stalin h-- was in the same boat. So therefore, you get a very dysfunctional form of rule in this personal regime that results from the pursuit of a strong state.

Now we can argue about why that happens and what the causality of that is. But it is an uncanny characteristic that we see repeated again and again. Like the special destiny idea, it's extremely popular. And like the special destiny idea, it seems to have very negative consequences for large numbers of people who live there, that is to say for the-- the very populace that identifies with either the special destiny or the strong state.

I could go on in this vein, but those are the two biggest things that we see. And so, you know, Putin is a hero out of Central Casting, all right? You couldn't do-- if you were in the United States and you needed somebody to be your enemy and you sort of were sitting in a room like this and bouncin' ideas back and forth and you were the script writers that our-- people who run our political system are. And you were saying, you know, "What do we need over there? Well, it's gotta be KGB, right? (LAUGH) Absolutely gotta be KGB. Can he be smart? No, he has to seem mediocre. Has to seem all evil, but not too smart at the same time, right?"

And there you go-- go on with the various other stuff. And then he's gotta have enemies that are-- that we consider potentially heroes. So he's gotta have some-- journalists that he attacks, either they're murdered or they're incarcerated. He's gotta have dissidents that he attacks. He's gotta have-- property that he expropriates, et cetera. So he fit it. He did the dream of the evil person that we needed over there. And so the-- the-- the-- it's very-- for those who are-- hawks on Russia, Putin is the perfect figure. He's the absolutely-- right out of Central Casting. And they-- they do wonders with him, right? They go really far with him. It's not as easy to make Ukraine Christ of nations the way you can do with Poland.

You can't quite put Ukraine into that box, because the Ukrainian elite wrecked that

country way before Putin got near it. But nonetheless, despite the fact that Ukraine doesn't work as well as Poland as a Christ of nation stories, Putin works perfectly as a Russian evil, Stalinesque, slightly-reduced figure, right?

And so th-- this-- big mileage on this, really big mileage. And so we have this very simplistic analysis in the culture that's extremely-- widespread d-- widely disseminated and has tremendous resonance in our political system about the evil that this guy represents and that he's perpetrated. And as the former head analyst of the KGB used to say, "The West is constantly blackening our image." And he added, "We, however, keep giving them material in order to achieve that goal." (LAUGH) Right.

Nikolai Leonov, the last analyst of the KGB before the Soviet Union collapse. So-- so we have that on the one hand. Then we have on the other hand the people who accept the Russian argument that they w-- that the sys-- the 1991 settlement was unfair. They've been mistreated and humiliated. And therefore, it's okay if they invade their neighbors, right?

So that's sort of-- simplistically, but that's sort of our debate in some ways, right? Heavy duty, moralistic, sometimes Russophobic-- anit-Putin analysis of Russia's behavior, where they violate international norms, as well as international laws, and where we have to do something very significant and substantial to put them down. And then on the other hand, "No, wait a minute, they're misunderstood. They-- they-- they're mistreated. You have to look at it from their point of view. And it's not fair, everything that-- that happened to them, right?"

And so you get caught up in that debate. That's the same debate we had with Stalin. Exactly the same debate. Different permutations, different stakes, obviously-- different levels of mobilization on each side. Different levels of victimhood outside each country, right? The Cold War was the Cold War. This is nothing compared to the Cold War. That doesn't mean this is nothing. This is nothing compared to the Cold War. You know, the-- the Russian regime causes a lot of grief for the inhabitants of Russia. The-- the Stalin regime caused immensely more grief for the inhabitants of that country, right? As well as the neighbors.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Stephen, maybe we-- if it's okay, Bill-- in our time remaining, maybe we turn to questions--

BILL KELLER:

Sure.

LEONARD BENARDO:

--from-- from-- from colleagues here. I should say-- and I forgot to mention, that-- that this event is being recorded. So anything that you say may be heard by others, at some point. (LAUGH) So with that, maybe I'll turn first to our colleagues in D.C., if they have anything that they would like to raise.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Put them on the spot.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE:

No questions here.

LEONARD BENARDO:

No questions from D.C. (LAUGH)

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Wise people in D.C. Great change, huh? (LAUGH)

LEONARD BENARDO:

So here in New York-- questions or comments to Stephen's dispassionate analysis? (LAUGH) Go ahead, Keith, ask a question.

KEITH:

I have a minor question. Why did you say "alleged" about the testament?

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Yeah, so we have very little documentation--

LEONARD BENARDO:

I don't know if they heard that, Steve, St-- Keith's not miked.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Well, so-- Valentine Sakharov, who's a historian at Moscow University, in 2002, wrote a substantial analysis of why-- Lenin's authorship of the testament is not documented. And that analysis-- may or may not be persuasive, but it's a serious analysis. And I have a version of that analysis with amplification in the Stalin book that I just wrote. And the short answer is that-- we don't-- we don't have a document that you could call the testament. So--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Stephen, can you describe the testament for everyone, just to give--

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

So-- allegedly, in December 1922, in January 1923, Lenin was giving dictation to one of his secretaries or to his wife. And that dictation was being recorded in shorthand. And Lenin was talking about his potential successors. And the two most famous documents, one was a characterization of six people, including-- Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Stalin, Bukharin, Pyatakov. And the other was an addendum calling for Stalin's removal.

And this has come down to us as *Lenin's Political Testament*. And so when you go to the archive to read that document, it doesn't exist. And that's the first troubling problem. Where is the shorthand? You know, when Lenin dic-- dictated something, a secretary recorded the dictation, not each word and not typed, but the equivalent of shorthand stenography, right? Where you would put-- initials for people or where you would put the front of a word and the back of a word, but you wouldn't necessarily write out the whole word.

We have such documents for other dictation of Lenin. But we don't have that for this particular dictation. Instead, we have a typescript. The typescript, however, changed over time. It wasn't the same typescript. The original typescript doesn't say *Testament of Lenin*. That was added by Trotsky's followers when they circulated it and they put *Lenin's Testament* on it and were called before the Central Control Commission by Dzerzhinsky and said, "You can't do this."

Anywhere there are more details along those lines. And so we have to be careful then attributing this to Lenin and the story is usually Lenin late in life had a break with Stalin, called for his removal. And therefore, Stalin is not the legitimate successor of Lenin, but a usurper. But, of course, the Bolsheviks have usurped power to begin with. So what people are actually talking about is Stalin stealing something that's already been stolen.

In any case, the testament has a very big impact on Stalin's psychology. And I believe w-- is maybe the principle-- trigger of his sociopathic behavior-- by the late 1920s.

But if you read the Sakharov carefully and if you go through the original documentation yourself, you know, when a document is produced by Lenin, it's recorded in the Secretariat. There's no record of any document in this particular case.

When something goes out of Lenin's Secretariat, it's recorded. When it comes in, it's recorded. There are the doctor's journals. Doctor's journals about how Lenin is paralyzed and can't speak. These are all sorts of issues that raise the question of maybe it's not Lenin's dictation. But we can't prove that it's a forgery. And we can't prove that it is a real document. So y-- that-- I'm cautious to say that in the book. And-- but not cautious about the tremendous impact that that document had.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Other questions to-- yes, Tonya Mugulina.

TONYA MUGULINA:

Hi, thank you very much for this fascinating presentation. I have two questions. One, I'm curious to hear is your book going to be translated into Russian? And if you plan on it being distributed in Russia, in what you anticipate the reaction there to be? And another question on-- in a very different vein-- I work with the-- in the Eurasia program here with Lenny. And we spend a significant portion of our time here guessing various scenarios for what's gonna happen-- in Russia. So just from your perspective, someone who has such great depth of knowledge of what has been-- perhaps you could suggest--

(OVERTALK)

LEONARD BENARDO:

--was he guessing? I thought we had a little bit more the-- (LAUGH) rigorous approach here at the Open Society Foundations.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Anticipated.

(OVERTALK)

TONYA MUGULINA:

Len-- Lenny has greater depth than I do. But I guess he knows.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Well, we'll ask him then.

TONYA MUGULINA:

But I'm just curious on those two things.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Yeah, so we were talking about this over meatballs, just before-- (LAUGH) just before we started this. It's true. About what's happening-- the reception or possible reception of something like this inside Russia. And the-- they are, as we-- we discussed, de-communizing the Communist past. So the Communist past is no-- the period of 1917 to '91 is no longer about Lenin. It's no longer about the Communist Party. It's no longer about the struggle for social justice, in that sense.

It's instead about the great power status only. It's about from peasant country to nuclear armed superpower. And Stalin is the central figure, clearly, in that. And so therefore, there is-- a tremendous interest in Stalin and Stalin's role in the war over Hitler and the victory in that war. And just in general, his ability to be a player on an equal or greater basis in global affairs during World War II and in the Cold War, the aftermath, right?

And so this is not that story. This is a story about how the great power stuff is certainly there. But this is about Communism. And it's Communism and the great power story. And so we're gonna see whether or not it-- it will be translated into Russian. I'm in negotiations for that possibility. And if so-- what the reception might be, given that the-- the line is antithetical to the general trend.

If you go into a bookstore anywhere in Russia today there is a very substantial Stalin section. The Stalin section, however, is not-- it's not solid history. It's, like, *Beria's Diary*, for example. *Beria's Diary* is-- Beria never wrote a diary, but every few years, Beria's diaries are republished (LAUGH) and widely sold. Or there's stories about Stalin's secret deal with Hitler or his secret correspondence with-- or the love child that they produced or whatever it might be. So that's the level of the stuff. But that stuff is selling, right?

TONYA MUGULINA:

Russian history's the most unpredict-- what is it? The most unpredictable history in the world? We like to say.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

You know, so w-- I don't know, w-- the answer to your question is we'll see. But the interest in Stalin is very, very high. And whether this type of book would fit or not fit that conjuncture remains to be seen. You know, on where Russia is going today, you know, so I don't think they know. And I don't think we know. Maybe Lenny knows.

TONYA MUGULINA:

Lenny knows. (LAUGH)

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

You know, let's-- let's-- let's be a little bit honest about this for a second. O.S.F. spent a very significant amount of money to create an open society in that part of the world. Many of you are leading program managers in that effort. I observed some of that effort on an occasional basis as a consultant. I supported that effort in many ways, not all of it. And I believe that there were tremendous benefits that came from that programmatic work.

And I believe that there is an open society to a very large extent in this part of the world. But one of the arguments that we had, not only with Lenny or-- or Lenny not only with me, and certainly O.S.F. was fully aware of this, at the time. And it was no big news. Is that there were other elements of the society that were not part of the open society agenda.

But they were part of the society, too, right? In other words, there's a big country out there. And that big country out there has, for example, orthodox church. And we could go on about all the various components of the big society, right? We can talk about anti-Americanism, which is the single most important globally resonant ideology today, not a liberal world order, but anti-Americanism.

You go to China, you go to Iran, you go to Russia, you go to Turkey, you go to Germany, right, an anti-Americanism is the stuff that is the glue of many of these places. Not exclusively, obviously, but it's very deep. And whether you're in agreement with this view or disagreement, whether you think there's cause for anti-Americanism or not, it is a global structure, a very, very important global structure.

And it was so in Russia in the '90s, although we didn't see it the same way we see it now. And it's a big deal now. And it's a big deal going forward. And it has to be managed. Once again, you can argue that America is causing this anti-Americanism. Or you can argue that it's gratuitous. And America's not causing it. I'm not taking-- a position on that. I'm just talking about the phenomenon's existence.

Then let's move to social conservatism, right? So the world is socially conservative. Not necessarily the world that we inhabit on a day to day basis, but the majority of the world is socially conservative. That is to say they don't necessarily-- wake up in

the morning in support of the rights of various different groups that we might support, whether that be Roma or whether that be gay marriage or whatever it might be, right?

There are significant parts of the world that do support those agendas. And-- but those are not the predominant ones in the vast majority of countries and cultures. That doesn't mean everybody is anti, but it means that the pro side of that is not necessarily as strong as we assume, right? And it also means that the anti side can mobilize resentment and backlash.

And so you have that in Russia in spades. And you have that in-- all through the '90s, when the open society was having many successful programs, like I said, right? And I think you have that going forward. You don't have that exclusively. Once again, this is not a monolithic argument. But you put together the resentment of American power and social conservatism. And you got a pretty big cocktail there. Got a pretty nice mix of things that you can take advantage of.

Then you add private property to the mix, but not private property in a rule of law sense, but private property in a patronage fashion, right? I've never seen a dictatorship that failed to award stolen property to its-- adherents. Every dictatorship does this. Trujillo did it in the Dominican Republic, right? The scale, however, is very different. When Trujillo expropriated property in the Dominican Republic and gave it to his cronies and friends, it didn't affect the world economy.

It didn't affect the price of oil or the price of aluminum or the G.D.P. in Europe or whatever else it might be, right? However, the effects in this case are much more significant, because the scale of the economy is very, very significant, right? Once again, this is not to support anything that's happening over there. I'm not taking a position that it's okay to steal property and give it to your friends, right? We don't want to misinterpret what I'm saying.

I'm just saying that that doesn't shock me, that type of behavior. It may be disgusting behavior. It may be illegal behavior. But it is not the kind of behavior that if you studied power institutions, authoritarian regimes-- world history, that shocks you. Even if you see people suffering from that. It's not necessarily shock. And I could go on with the rest of this analysis, right? So we have--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Stephen, let's take a few more questions.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

But I'm just-- I'm just saying the-- the future of Russia is therefore about some version of coming to grips with resentment on American power. Some version of coming to grips with social conservatism having a place--

(OVERTALK)

LEONARD BENARDO:

But Stephen, these are not fixed constants. These are hugely variable things. Anti-Americanism in Russia--

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

They can shift.

LEONARD BENARDO:

--was-- was-- was perhaps less than half of what it is today two years ago. So, I mean, if--

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Depends how you measure it. You know, you have the-- the measuring of polls and of polling and scientific polling. I mean, a lot of that stuff you gotta read what the questions ask for. And they're unsophisticated questions that are then compared over time. And the questions are not identical questions.

LEONARD BENARDO:

I'm just citing lead-- the leading polls. But let me--

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

But let's just-- let's just put it this way.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Stephen, let me just turn to Laura Silver for a second, 'cause she's been trying to get in, very quick. Miss Silver?

LAURA SILVER:

I'm just trying very aggressively.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

But I-- but I-- but I gotta finish this point, Lenny, because it's not that this stuff is so variable. It's-- there's not a caprice in the Putin regime the same way. It's not solely determined by structures, so that Putin is-- doesn't have any agency. Of course that's not the case, right? Putin has tremendous amount of agency. And it makes a huge difference who the leader is. Somebody I greatly respect used to say, you know, it didn't matter who was the executive editor of the *Times*. Even a monkey could run the *Times*. Actually, that's false. Leadership--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Was that Liam Rosenthal? (LAUGH)

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

I doubt it. (LAUGH) Leadership matters. It matters very significantly. And Putin's personality is a significant factor in a lot of the stuff that's happening in Russia. But it could be the case that Putin could, for example, not be immortal. There could be a day in which he's gone, all right? And that may not necessarily change the situation as much as we would like. In part, because of the legacies of his rule, just like the legacies of Stalin rule. And in part, because there are structures in addition to Putin that are very significant factors that we have to take into account in our analyses, right?

This is not to say that Russia can't have a better future than its present. I would like to hope that it can have a better future than its present and that it will have a better future than its present, all right? But you have to come to grips with some of these larger-- factors or structures.

LEONARD BENARDO:

But when you say-- when you use the-- the subject "you," who's the you you're referring to?

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

If you're analyzing where Russia is going, that was the question to me. Right? I didn't ask myself the question--

(OVERTALK)

TONYA MUGULINA:

I did. I'm not planted.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

And-- and I tried to answer the question.

LEONARD BENARDO:

No, fair enough.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Maybe, like she said, you have a better answer, which is-- which is plausible, since my answer isn't very satisfying to you.

LEONARD BENARDO:

All right, Stephen, I'm gonna-- I'm gonna turn to Laura.

LAURA SILVER:

First of all, I love the book. And I don't want to spoil it. I'm not done. So don't spoil the ending for me. (LAUGH) But-- I'm reading it. And I really, really like it. But you talk about, you know, he wasn't a sociopath. We don't have any indication of that. Can you talk a little bit more to us about the moment when you think the sort of equation of personal power really overcame him and he became a sociopath? I mean, do you have any insight into that? And also could you comment on looking at the fall of h-- the price of hydrocarbons and the ruble and what-- throw that into your dangerous cocktail in Russia?

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

So I'm not sure I could answer the first question, because of the way you prefaced it.

LAURA SILVER:

I'll be okay. I'm kidding about the ending--

(OVERTALK)

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Power changes people. It has a big effect on them. You can see this at lower levels, in the very institutions in which we inhabit. And obviously, you can see it on the high levels, the government level. You see people before, during, and after. You know, somebody's who's secretary of state of the United States, which is not a tremendously powerful position compared to what we're talking about. But it's transformative on them. You get on a personal plane. You ride around the world. You have a gigantic entourage. You're received in all these foreign capitals. It's intoxicating. It's very hard to give that up.

People who are no longer secretary of state, there is a withdrawal problem there, because of the kind of power they felt. This is not necessarily talking about sociopathic behavior yet. I'm just talking about how power is transformative on people. Once you get into dictatorial power, where you have the power of life and death over individuals, 'cause that's what we're talkin' about with dictatorship, right? That's transformative in a different way.

The power of life and death is obviously very different from the power of being-- secretary of state of the United States, right? And that power over life and death also is powerfully-- over property. And there's no such thing as property rights in a dictatorship if the dictator determines there's no such thing as property rights and has the capacity to act on that type of behavior, right?

And so I believe it would be implausible if that type of power, if Stalin were exercising that power, that he didn't begin to feel differently while exercising that, you know? There were a lot of resentments that built up. There are a lot of things he didn't like in life, when he was rolling around in the snow, in the North or in Siberia, in exile. But he's a punk. He's nothing. Has no profession, like I said, no job, no money, no life prospects.

He's a complete failure by anybody's assessment, including his own, right? And that can have certain effects on your personality also. But now he's in power. He's the guy-- he's at the center of every-- he's the liaison with the police. He's the liaison with the military. He controls the cypher codes. He's the only one who can send out information to all the provinces, all the republics. He's the only one that receives all that information and then collates it or not to give to other people.

He comes to meetings like this, in a room this size. And he walks in. And he's the center of attention immediately. Nothing happens in many cases till he walks in. And he sits off to the side. But nonetheless, he's the center of that room. "And oh, by the way, I put down a revolt in the Caucuses three months ago," he says at the meeting. And there in the politburo. And they didn't know that there were-- were any revolt in the Caucuses three months ago.

He's the only one who knows that. His aides know that. They're sitting right behind the table, taking the notes of the meeting. The tendentious notes of the meeting that are gonna be distributed about who said what. That kind of power has tremendous

effect on human. He begins to-- he begins to go after people. He begins to stick the knife in people. He begins to play with them sadistically.

He-- Bukharin, he's treating like a son or even a younger brother for a long time. Deeply friendly with him. Allowing Bukharin to come to the dacha (PH) for the whole summer when Stalin is at the Zubola Vidontcha (PH). And then just doing stuff to Bukharin, 1927 and '28, stuff that goes in deep. And he knows it goes in deep. And then he twists it, right? That's power. That's about power.

It's the ability to do this kind of stuff and have an effect. Now clearly there's somethin' demented there to get pleasure out of that. Many people would feel-- horrible at having to take difficult decisions, decisions that badly affect-- large numbers of people, let alone loved ones or friends. He gets pleasure out of that. Where that pleasure comes from we don't have documentation to discuss.

We only have speculation. And you're welcome to speculate like everybody else is, right? But the fact that that's beginning to happen in '27-'28, we have documentation on that. That he's beginning to do it, whenever the well springs. So let's talk about oil and the ruble and everything else, right? So, you know, we have this-- these constant-- we have tremendous silliness about the Russian economy. There's more silliness about the Russian economy than almost any other subject in Russia.

We have people who write a lot of journalism who are, in many ways, talented, but don't know economics. They don't understand exchange rates. They don't know what happens to currencies when global commodity prices change. Right? They don't know what happens-- the difference between purchasing power parity sometimes and absolute G.D.P., et cetera. And so you get conversations about the Russian economy that are breathtaking.

So here's a very simple version of the story which I believe c-- I could give at greater length, more complicated. But 30% of the Russian economy is oil and gas. 30%. That's huge, right? But that 70% is not oil and gas. 70% is not oil and gas. You have 70% of a very large economy, one of the top 12, 13, 14 economies in the world. Now you can say there are knock-on effects of oil and gas. Fine.

What's the knock-on effect of oil and gas in other sectors? You can get up to 40% with the knock-on effect. And you can take a higher-- you can even say, "Oh, the knock-on effects are much stronger than you say." Okay, fine, you know, they're 45%. You can keep pushing. But you can't get over 50% of the economy is oil and gas, even with knock-on effects. You can't.

Because it's just factually untrue. And so therefore, there's a large, substantial economy in Russia that's real. It's biotech. It's food processing. It's retail. It's design. It's software. It's a big economy. And it's a big middle class. There's a middle class not just in Moscow, as you know. You travel around. There's a middle class in every substantial city.

There's a big middle class in Lipetsk. Who has ever seen Lipetsk? But it's got a substantial middle class, all right? Okay, some of it is metal, some of it is chemicals, a lot of it is legacy Soviet industries. But there's a new economy that the Soviets didn't

have, in addition to the legacy economy. You go from $200 billion G.D.P. under Yeltsin at the (UNINTEL), to $2 trillion under Putin.

A lot of that is exchange rate inflation. However, you have $1.8 trillion wealth creation in a ten-year period. And 30% of that is oil and gas. And maybe 45% at the highest level with the knock-on is oil and gas. But you're still close to a trillion dollars in value that's not oil and gas.

And so, you know, obviously, oil and gas is very significant. 'Cause it's the budget. It's the state budget, right? It's the export game. So that's how you pay the debt, if you take on any debt. But it is not equivalent to the economy. There are petro states in the world, where it's not 30% or it's not 40%. Where it's 60% or it's 70% or it's 80%. You know, you can ask all of the people who serve in Cent-Com in-- in Tampa about what a petro state really looks like.

Okay, so when the price of oil declines, your currency, which was overvalued, because of the price of oil, massively declines. Russia doubles G.D.P. in ruble terms from-- late Yeltsin to Putin, but it goes ten times in dollar term almost, right? $2 billion to $2 trillion in dollar terms, but double in ruble terms. So you have a massively inflated ruble, because of the global commodity price under Putin.

And so that can't be sustained and should not be sustained and needs to go (MAKES NOISE) down. And it did go down. And it properly went down. And it was predictable that it would go down if the price of oil went down. When the ruble was devalued in 1998 and everyone said, "That's catastrophic. That's the end of the world. We're-- you know, no more reform." Of course, that's when the boom began.

Because the revaluation of the currency is one way you get competitive economically, right? That's why Europe is stuck, 'cause they can't devalue. And they can't get competitive again. And instead, they just have to deflate at home and lower their wages and throw people out of jobs, right? At Greece and Spain and all that horror, right? Russia can-- devalue the currency. And therefore make itself cheaper on global markets and potentially become more competitive.

It doesn't mean they will become more competitive. It happened. That's the Putin boot, right? That's where it starts. It starts with a tremendous devaluation in making things more competitive at home. So the decline of the price of oil and the crashing of the ruble are potentially extremely salutary for that economy. The crashing oil price puts pressure on the government to undertake reforms, stop the expropriation and do some more serious, rule of law liberalization economic measures. They don't--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Or-- or alternatively--

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

--have to do that.

LEONARD BENARDO:

--to come up with a distraction like invading Ukraine.

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

We'll get to that in a second. But just to-- to finish the point, it could potentially be salutary, not detrimental, depending on the policy reaction. The same thing with domestic industry. They have never revived domestic agriculture. They are more dependent, as you know, on imports of European food than Europe is on imports of Russian gas. Right?

Because the agriculture was never really modernized. The collectivization story, which we started out with today, about how-- that being the-- the-- the pre-- the core criminal act and the core detrimental act for this country's history, in many ways, right? If you read all the special secret-most files of the cosegan (PH)-- primier-- prime ministership in the '60s and '70s, it's all grain in-- imports. It's all grain. Grain, grain, grain. Canadian grain. Argentinian grain. American grain.

That's the secret-most documents of the brejnevier (PH) is all the grain stuff, right? They were importing grain. They couldn't feed their own people. And now they're importing everything, not just grain. They can't feed their own people. But that's also an opportunity given the amount of agricultural land that's available, given the way the prices now have changed, because of the devaluation.

So a good policy structure now could take advantage and turn these into advantages. What about the Ukrainian stuff and all? So we have a view about this that the aggression vis-à-vis Ukraine is possibly driven by a sense of failure and weakness at home, all right? In other words, things weren't goin' well. Putin came back for the third term, but wasn't as popular as he thought he was gonna be. And the economy wasn't growing the same way anymore.

And therefore, he needed to compensate for this in some way. You know, we don't have that-- that's-- that's a supposition. There's no evidence that that's the case, 'cause we don't have any evidence on internal regime decision making. The regime has narrowed. The first echelon is much smaller than it ever was before. And I personally have no inside information about the first echelon. Although I used to have-- contacts inside the first echelon, when it was a little bit wider and had a different composition.

So I don't know what the decision making was on the Ukrainian stuff. I don't know if it's driven by a sense of compensation. And I don't know if the theory holds that if it worsens at home, it gets more aggressive abroad. One of the analyses of China is the

opposite. Also without evidence, also very speculative, imputing motives. But the-- as China feels more confident, it pushes out and gets more aggressive externally.

It's not from lack of confidence. It's from confidence. Either the lack of confidence or the confidence argument may be correct. But we can't say whether it's correct or not. If there is further aggression, if we're in the middle rather than the end game of what we've been observing, it's possible that this will be motivated by-- the economic reform being too hard. And the outside aggression being a much easier path of least resistance.

It's plausible. And I wouldn't want to rule that out. I-- we just want to know what the facts were, right? In the end, you know, it's-- it's detrimental for everybody, including for the population of Russia, for Russia to be outside international structures. I don't agree with the analysis that the U.S. is to blame for Russia being outside international structures. As I said, you know, we had this with the Cold War also, right?

Stalin was misunderstood and mistreated. And therefore, he invaded Eastern Europe and too it over, right? I don't think that's the case. But nonetheless, I don't agree that Russia being a pariah is a form of stabilization going forward. Neither for that country internally nor for its neighbors. The scale of detrimental effects, as we said before, is not as significant as it was earlier. But it's still significant.

And so finding a way in which Russia is a part of international structures, as opposed to a pariah outside of them, constantly against them, is in the global interest. Being able to do that is just not easy. Because of many of the things we've been talking about today. And it's ultimately up to them to want to participate in these larger structures and participate on terms that they can't dictate, because they don't have the capacity to dictate terms, even though they act like they have the capacity to dictate terms, right?

So I'm in favor of finding measures of negotiation with them without approving some of the kind of behavior that they've undertaken. But the idea that we arm their neighbors to the best that we can afford and we send those arms, you know, to every neighbor we can. And we contain and isolate Russia until they suffer so much that they cry "uncle", right? I'm not sure that that's a stable policy, nor is that necessarily a fe-- a feasible policy.

Because some of the neighbors we'd like to arm are in worse shape than Russia is in-- in-- in terms of governance or not in better shape, even if their governance is slightly different. So it's a very big, serious problem. But the final comment I'll make is on a world scale, the Russia problem is not significant compared to the China story, right? Why do we bomb countries in the Middle East?

And the answer is, "We can." They're small. They don't have any anti-aircraft stuff that can outlast our initial bombing. And we can do what we want. And we do. We bomb them. Why do we have sanctions on Russia? Because we can. They are not integrated into the U.S. economy. They're a very small portion of trade with the U.S. Of course, if our friends from Exxon-Mobil were here, our friends from Caterpillar,

our friends from McDonalds, they would disagree.

But in the larger scale of things, if you measure things unsentimentally, the economic relationship is insignificant. And therefore the cost to the U.S. of sanctions against Russia are insignificant. We sanction them because we can. We can't bomb them. There's no way to bomb them. They have, first of all, a re-- a real army, even though it's small. The-- the actual army that they have that's significant is small. They have a giant army, but you know about that.

And they have nuclear weapons. And there are other issues. They have cyber warfare. We can't bomb them. We can sanction them. We can bomb the Middle East. We sanction the Middle East. We cannot bomb Russia. We can sanction-- how about China? Well, you can't bomb China. You can't sanction China, either. 'Cause sanctioning China, you're sanctioning yourself. That's our economy. They're fully integrated with the U.S. The scale of trade is phenomenal.

And the number of companies affected and the livelihood and all the people in this room are affected by sanctions against China, which is not necessarily the case with sanctions against Russia. So the China story's really tough. Can't bomb. Can't sanction. What can you do? They're fully integrated into the world economy. But if they decide, because they can, behave in such a way that they want to alter the current international order, because they were not there at the creation of it. And they feel it's not fair towards them. And they want to alter it. What can we actually do about that?

If they want to change geographical borders, if they want to change sea borders, we've seen that, if they want to do whatever they want to do. They want to steal intellectual property. I'm not saying they're-- they're doing that. I'm saying that let's suppose they want to do that. All that, what are the tools in the tool kit vis-à-vis China? And it's a very deep and serious conundrum for U.S. policymakers.

This is not to say that the U.S. is always on the right side, always on the side of international law, never misbehaving. We all know the answer to that question. There's no need to get into specifics to understand that the U.S. is not holier than thou. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about if China should engage in behavior that great powers engage in, which is to revise the international system to their benefit, because they're able to do that, what is the answer on the U.S. side?

LEONARD BENARDO:

Stephen, we're gonna have to-- this is-- we're gonna have you back for the China trilogy. (LAUGH) No doubt. Obviously, also, you know, China has $3 trillion of treasury bills that makes it difficult to sanction. But this is--

STEPHEN KOTKIN:

Go ahead.

LEONARD BENARDO:

--a cust-- no, no, no, no. I'm not gonna go there. A cu-- (LAUGH) a customary Steve Kotkin tour de force. Thank you immensely. Bill, thank you very much--

BILL KELLER:

Sure, a pleasure.

LEONARD BENARDO:

--for participating. I strongly recommend those of you to go out to get Stephen-- as Laura did, Stephen's first volume on Stalin from Penguin Press. And thank you all. Thank you, D.C. Thank you, Erik, very much.

LAURA SILVER:

Thank you. (APPLAUSE)

* * *END OF TRANSCRIPT* * *