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Alfred J. Rieber is one of the most recognizable names in Russian studies: a prolific writer who continues to deliver groundbreaking monographs even on well-ploughed ground, a dot-connector, bringing more than half-a-century of thinking to familiar milieux, a historian and a witness to history. Rieber, born in Mount Vernon, New York, in 1931, obtained his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1959. From 1965 until his retirement in 1995 he taught at the University of Pennsylvania, where he also chaired the Department of History. In 1995 Rieber made an unexpected and daring move to Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, where he taught until 2007. He is Professor Emeritus at Pennsylvania and CEU.

Rieber’s scholarly interests center on Russia’s nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among his books are *Stalin and the French Communist Party 1941-1947* (1962), the classic study *Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia* (1982), and *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War* (2014), of which the present volume is a sequel.

The book is reviewed by two renowned historians of Russia, Geoffrey Roberts (University College Cork, Ireland) and David Wolff (University of Hokkaido, Japan). Roberts has written extensively on Soviet leader Joseph Stalin; among his most well-known works are *Stalin’s Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (2007), and the recent biographies of Vyacheslav Molotov (2011) and Georgii Zhukov (2012). Wolff’s interests include the Russo-Japanese War, the First World War, the Cold War, and the Sino-Russian borderlands. He is the author of *To the Harbin Station: The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria* (1999), and an editor of *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero*, vols. I and II (2005-2007).

The two reviewers agree on their positive assessment of Rieber’s latest magnum opus and commend the author for what Roberts calls “a tour de force” and Wolff “a very rich text” likely to benefit readers from many fields. Neither reviewer has felt the need to snipe at the book from the entrenched battle lines of traditionalist or revisionist historiography, though Rieber’s occasional conclusions (on such controversial subjects as the 1939 Soviet-Nazi Pact, Stalin’s share of responsibility for the ethnic cleansing of Europe, Stalin’s responsibility for the outbreak of the Cold War, etc.) almost beg a polemical response. Roberts

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endorses what he sees as Rieber’s “dismay for the political posturing that still bedevils Soviet foreign policy studies.” Hints are dropped but cans of worms remain unopened, perhaps to good effect.

Instead, Roberts and Wolff concentrate on Rieber’s big thesis of Stalin as the “man of the borderlands,” i.e. the notion that Stalin’s ethnic background (as a Georgian), and his years of experience as a revolutionary in the Russian Empire’s multi-ethnic borderlands, shaped his approach to foreign policy in his later years. The reviewers agree that the borderlands were important for Stalin, yet they also challenge Rieber on just how important they were. Few would doubt that Stalin was a skilful player of the nationalities card, and that he paid great attention to building up concentric circles of friendly buffer states, but was it all that there was when it comes to Stalin? Where do Stalin’s global visions fit in the picture? What happened to Marxist-Leninist ideology? As I read the book I asked myself some of the same questions as those posed by Roberts and Wolff. But like the two reviewers I found Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia a compelling read. I would like to congratulate Alfred J. Rieber on raising the bar, and to thank the two indomitable reviewers for their fair and penetrating critiques.

Participants:

Alfred J. Rieber is currently University Professor Emeritus at the CEU and Professor Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania. He has served as chair of the History Departments at both universities where he also won teaching awards. His research interests span the imperial and Soviet periods of Russian history. He has been the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim, Woodrow Wilson, Ford, ACLS and National Council for the Humanities Foundations. Among his numerous books are The Politics of Autocracy (1966), Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Imperial Russia (1982), The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War (2014) and Stalin and the Struggle for Eurasia (2015) which was short listed for the Pushkin Prize. A collection of previously published articles edited and supplemented with fresh archival based chapters will be published by The University of Toronto Press next year. He has just completed a chapter for the New Cambridge History of Communism on “Anti-Fascist Resistance during the Second World War” and another entitled “Imperial Russia in Asia” for the forthcoming Oxford Encyclopedia of Asia.

Sergey Radchenko is Professor of International Relations at Cardiff University. His research interests include the Cold War and the history of Chinese and Soviet foreign relations. He is the author of Two Suns in the Heavens: the Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy (Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2009) and Unwanted Visionaries: the Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War (Oxford University Press, 2014). He is currently working on a history of Chinese foreign relations since 1949.

Geoffrey Roberts is Professor of History at University College Cork, Ireland. He is the author of Stalin’s Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953 (Yale University Press, 2006); Stalin’s General: The Life of Georgy Zhukov (Random House, 2012); and Molotov: Stalin’s Cold Warrior (Potomac Books, 2012).

David Wolff is Professor of Eurasian History at Hokkaido University. He is the author of To the Harbin Station: The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898-1914 (Stanford University Press, 1999). He is presently preparing a monograph on Stalin’s postwar Far Eastern policy.
In the past twenty years Alfred J. Rieber has published a series of ground-breaking essays on the causes and circumstances of Soviet expansion into central and Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War.\(^1\) Meticulous mining of archival sources, bold hypotheses, and disdain for the political posturing that still bedevils Soviet foreign policy studies are the hallmarks of his writings.

The present book builds on this impressive body of work as well as a previous volume, *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands.*\(^2\) Its big idea is “the borderlands thesis,” a concept Rieber first deployed to great effect in a seminal 2001 article on “Stalin: Man of the Borderlands.”\(^3\) Rieber’s elaboration of the borderlands thesis in *Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia* is a tour de force. The problem is that its brilliance dazzles as well as illuminates.

The borderlands thesis is complex and multi-layered. Its first iteration was as a framing device for Stalin’s biography. According to Rieber, it was Stalin’s Georgian identity and his experience of political activity in the multi-ethnic borderlands of the Russian empire that shaped his response to the Soviet state-building project. As Soviet ruler Stalin was a centraliser who subordinated the periphery of the former Russian empire to its advanced, proletarian core in central Russia. National and ethnic minorities were given regional and cultural autonomy but denied self-government. In effect, Stalin strove to create a state in his own self-image as a Georgian, a proletarian and the ruler of a Russian-based Soviet state.

In his 2001 article Rieber traced Stalin’s personal and psychological journey across space and time, from Georgian revolutionary to Russian Bolshevik to Soviet state-builder. In this transition Stalin’s Georgian roots were progressively subordinated to his constructed Russian identity but never entirely eliminated. The Soviet system—national in form but socialist in content—reflected Stalin’s personification of multiple identities as a Georgian, a Russian and a proletarian.

Perceptions of the danger posed to Bolshevik power by the porous borders of its multi-ethnic periphery – dangers accentuated by the post-First World War creation of a number of weak, post-imperial successor states, especially in Europe – were fundamental to Stalin’s commitment to a strong, centralised Soviet state. Thus, another strand of the borderlands thesis is the role of “persistent factors” in Russian and Soviet foreign policy, which Rieber identifies as being (i) the multinational character of the Russian/Soviet state; (ii) porous or permeable frontiers; (iii) relative economic backwardness; and, (iv) cultural alienation from the west. These


factors are not fixed or immutable, argues Rieber, and they evolve over time, but they do constitute the fundamental conditions in which political choices are made, Stalin's response to these challenges, his efforts to overcome and transform the persistent factors of Russian history, shaped Soviet foreign policy in the first half of the 20th century.  

A third facet of the borderlands thesis is that it provides a conceptual schema-cum-narrative framework for Rieber's description and analysis of Soviet policy towards neighbouring states. Stalin's higher education in foreign policy, he points out, began with the Russian Civil War: "in the crucible of Russia's Time of Troubles, Stalin tested and refined the tactics that he would subsequently employ in his Second World War foreign policy" (46).

Stalin's priority during the Civil War was not the Bolshevik project of world revolution but defence of Soviet Russia's borderlands against both imperialist incursion and internal subversion. Local nationalists and their compatriots across borders were as much the enemy as foreign imperialists, and Stalin relied on the Russian proletarian core to support his defence of Bolshevik power in the borderlands.

After the civil war Stalin's views on the borderlands and the national question drew him into conflict with Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin over the new Soviet constitution. Lenin wanted a genuine socialist federalism in which ethnically-based constituent units would have political autonomy and the right to secede. What Lenin had in mind, too, was the future expansion of this socialist federation to include other states when the revolution spread abroad. For Stalin, it was more important to control the centrifugal forces of nationalism in the Russian borderlands and to bind tightly the periphery to the centre. With Lenin ailing after a series of strokes, Stalin had the advantage in this debate and his views more than Lenin's shaped the compromise outcome of a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—in theory federalist but, in practice, highly centralised.

The Bolsheviks came to power in 1917 with a concept of mutual interdependence between the Russia revolution and the world revolution. But more important in Stalin's view was the mutual interdependence of Russia and its borderlands. "Central Russia, the hearth of the world revolution cannot hold out long without the assistance of the border regions, which abound in raw materials, fuels and foodstuffs", Rieber cites Stalin as writing in 1920. "The border regions of Russia, in their turn, are inevitably doomed to imperialist bondage without the political, military or organizational support of the more developed Central Russia" (68).

In Rieber's view, Stalin's borderlands policy was central to his domestic as well as his foreign policy in the 1920s and 1930s. Collectivisation of agriculture and forced industrialisation were seen by Stalin as part of the struggle to secure the backward and underdeveloped borderlands. The Great Terror of the 1930s was in large part an ethnic purge of nationalist elements in the borderlands. This struggle for the borderlands was conducted in Asia and the Near East as well as in Europe. Rieber is no Eurocentrist and his book deals in detail with all these theatres of action.

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Stalin’s foreign policy thinking, strategy, and tactics were not always clear or consistent but the picture that emerges from Rieber’s book is that Stalin evolved a schema in which the defence of the Soviet Union was seen as primarily territorial. The Soviet Union was a citadel of socialism surrounded by capitalist enemies and its western and eastern borderlands were its first line of defence. In 1939 the Nazi-Soviet pact gave Stalin the opportunity to deepen his western fortifications, first by invading eastern Poland and incorporating Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine into the USSR and, second, by dominating and then annexing the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Both operations were accompanied by ethnic purging of suspect elements that was typical of Stalin’s nationalities policy. When German dictator Adolf Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, these and other territorial gains from the Nazi-Soviet pact were temporarily lost but Stalin was determined to re-establish the USSR’s frontiers and to re-sovietise the western borderlands.

Beyond the borderlands Stalin strove to control an inner perimeter of strategic strongpoints and footholds in the Baltic and Black seas and in Asia. Also considered part of the inner perimeter were the friendly, progressive governments in Europe and Asia that Stalin hoped to see established after the war. The outer perimeter of defence was the world Communist movement, pursuing its own path to revolution and seeking to influence western governments in a direction favourable to the Soviet Union or, at least, not actively hostile.

The idea that Stalin’s foreign policy was centred on the pursuit of a defensive glacis and that his goals and tactics varied according to the power he wielded in different territorial zones is a story that has been told before. What Rieber does is to place the borderlands at the centre of this story and to trace Stalin’s strategy back to his territorialisation of the Bolshevik Revolution in the 1920s.

Implicit in Stalin’s declarations on ‘socialism in one country’ in the mid-1920s, argues Rieber, was the idea that the purpose of revolution was to defend the Soviet Union. In the first instance, revolutions in countries adjacent to the USSR would shore up defence of the Soviet borderlands and would replace capitalist encirclement with socialist encirclement. Stalin perceived the USSR as besieged and sought when and where he could to relieve the siege, not least during and after the Second World War.

It seems to me that Rieber’s interpretation of ‘socialism in one country’ is a bit of a stretch. He makes much of the fact that Stalin dropped the modifier “advanced” when arguing in 1926 that socialism in the Soviet Union could only be finally achieved if “the proletariat is victorious in at least several more countries”. Rieber comments:

“The political implications of Stalin’s formula were stunning. If Stalin literally meant what he said, and his attitude toward revolutionary movements tends to confirm that he did, then he was asserting that the creation and security of the socialist state in the USSR depended on carrying out revolutions in a belt of overwhelmingly agrarian, economically backward territories adjacent to the Soviet frontier. It meant that the

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5 For example, Geir Lundestad who distinguished between Soviet policy and action in “the outer sphere” (Western Europe, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Africa, America, and most of Asia); “the middle sphere” (Finland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Albania, Yugoslavia and East Germany); “the inner sphere” (Poland, Romania, Bulgaria); and “the absolute sphere” (the territory occupied by the USSR during the period of the Nazi-Soviet pact). See Geir Lundestad, “The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1943-1947,” appendix to his The American Non-Policy towards Eastern Europe, 1943-1947 (Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget, 1978).
primary objective of Soviet foreign policy was not to spread revolution to the highly developed capitalist states of Europe and North America.” (95-96)

But in reading the cited speech of November 1926 it is difficult to see anything other than a model of Bolshevik orthodoxy. Stalin’s text consistently refers to proletarian revolutions, a clear indication he meant revolutions in the advanced capitalist countries rather than the peasant-dominated, agrarian, and backward borderlands. Stalin was, it is true, more sceptical than most Bolsheviks about the prospects for revolution in the west but he had not given up on the possibility. During the Comintern’s ultra-leftist ‘third period’ in the late 1920s and early 1930s Stalin was as enthusiastic as his comrades about the supposedly imminent revolutionary conjuncture arising in the crisis-wracked advanced capitalist world. The Nazi revolution and the destruction of the powerful German Communist Party (KPD) sobered him up, as it did the Comintern, but socialism globally remained his goal. To the end of his life, Stalin continued to lecture western Communists on the revolutionary strategies they should pursue in their own countries.

Rieber shows in unprecedented detail how important borderlands policy was to Stalin. In so doing he identifies threads of Soviet foreign policy that have been neglected by historians. But was borderland security as important and central as he suggests? Was Stalin really such a self-conscious exponent of the borderlands thesis?

The borderlands thesis is a powerful explanatory device but it can be overstated. Stalin was a Bolshevik internationalist as well as a man of the borderlands. He was a politician and an intellectual with a range of priorities, interests and concerns. Stalin’s thinking and action were centred on the USSR but ranged far beyond it. Rieber’s book gives the impression that the borderlands were a singular, consuming passion for Stalin. But that is not apparent from a detailed examination of his thinking, statements, activities, and policies. Stalin’s foreign policy was rather a tapestry woven from many different threads. Rieber’s book contains glimpses of those many strands of Stalin’s foreign policy but they tend to be overwhelmed by the imagery of the borderlands thesis.

The subject I know best is Stalin’s foreign policy during the Second World War, about which I have written extensively. Rieber writes that “Stalin never fully understood the international system, and what he saw of it he distrusted. For him the best diplomacy was bilateral in form and vague in content” (234). These statements would surprise the numerous politicians and diplomats who met and negotiated with Stalin during the war. In countless meetings with foreign representatives Stalin displayed a voluminous knowledge of international

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affairs, deep understanding of state behaviour, and a solid grasp of diplomacy. His insistence on specific, concrete agreements was legendary. In diplomacy, Stalin told the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden in December 1941, he much preferred arithmetic to algebra.

As Rieber notes, there was no programmatic declaration of Soviet war aims. But Stalin’s goals were transparent in his speeches, correspondence and diplomacy. These goals evolved during the war and became more ambitious as the outcome of the war swung to favour the Soviets and the Red Army marched to Berlin. Those goals may be summarised thus: liberation of Europe from Nazi occupation and the re-establishment of the prewar state system; the restoration and security of the USSR’s 1941 borders; friendly governments in neighbouring states; containment of German and Japanese aggression; a peacetime grand alliance with Britain and the United States; progressive, left-wing regimes across Europe, including varying degrees of ‘new’ or ‘people’s’ democracy; acquisition of resources for the rapid reconstruction of the Soviet Union after the war, including the extraction of reparations from enemy states.

In the western borderlands Stalin faced a complex of civil wars and insurrections against Communist and Soviet rule that persisted for a decade after the war. Rieber’s treatment of the borderlands’ civil wars is one of the highlights of the book. As Rieber details, an important part of Stalin’s solution to the conflicts and instabilities of the borderlands was ethnic homogenisation, which involved massive population transfers between Poland and Ukraine, as well as the expulsion of twelve million Germans from East-Central Europe.

Beyond the borderlands, Stalin’s key geopolitical goal was the neutralisation of the German threat. Stalin was convinced that unless its power was permanently curtailed, Germany would recover in twenty to thirty years and there would be another major war. He held similar views in relation to Japan but perceived the Japanese as a far lesser threat to Soviet security.

Rieber contends that promoting the dismemberment of Germany – breaking it into several small states - was merely a transient, wartime tactic of Stalin’s. However, it is clear from Soviet records that Stalin was strongly and strategically committed to dismemberment. At the February 1945 Yalta conference, for example, he pushed very hard for a firm commitment on dismemberment, but this was resisted by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. From those discussions he concluded the west was not serious about dismemberment and he abandoned the policy in March 1945. Thereafter Soviet policy was to neutralise the German threat through disarmament and demilitarisation. Germany’s revival continued to be Moscow’s prime security concern for a decade after the Second World War.

Stalin’s ideal solution to the German question was that Germany evolve into a people’s democracy. This did not mean the creation of a socialist or a Soviet Germany but rather a transitional regime heading in the direction of socialism. This was Stalin’s perspective for the whole of Europe, but especially Central and Eastern Europe. His was a geo-ideological concept of security in which the pro-Soviet governments he desired would be guaranteed by their progressive hue and the beneficial influence of the Soviets’ Communist allies. Importantly, Stalin believed – or at least hoped - this new political context would make it possible to maintain post-war collaboration with the British and Americans. The Cold War put paid to these hopes and by the late

1940s ‘people’s democracy’ had become a euphemism for Soviet-type systems under communist party domination.

While there were many ambiguities and tensions in Stalin’s vision of a people’s democratic Europe\textsuperscript{10}, it does demonstrate his capacity for global and innovative thinking. Borderlands security was only one facet – albeit a highly important one – of his postwar conspectus.

Rieber concludes by noting that although Stalin achieved hegemony in the USSR’s Eurasian borderlands, it was not long before the glacis creaked and then, eventually, cracked. By the late 1940s Finland had escaped transition to a full-blown people’s democracy and Yugoslavia had broken from the Communist bloc. In the 1950s there were revolts against Soviet domination in East Germany, Poland and Hungary. In the 1960s there was the Sino-Soviet split, Romania’s assertion of autonomy and the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia. The renewal of the Polish crisis in the 1970s and 1980s presaged the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the 1990s, the loss of the Baltic States and Ukraine, and the breakup of the USSR: “once the defences of the inner perimeter gave way, the citadel of Russia stood alone.” (408)

Stalin and Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia is a book that lives up to its back-cover endorsements by the scholars Lynne Viola and Steven Marks. It is “a remarkable work of scholarship” (Viola) and the borderlands thesis is “revelatory” (Marks), even to someone like me who has been studying Soviet foreign policy for more than 40 years. But it is not the whole story. The narrative drive of a bold hypothesis may be highly illuminating but it can also blind us to the broader picture. To use a favourite formula of Stalin’s, Rieber’s borderlands thesis is a necessary but not sufficient explanation of Soviet foreign policy under Stalin.

\textsuperscript{10} These are explored by Rieber in “Popular Democracy: An Illusion?” in V. Tismaneanu (ed.), Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009), 103-128.
Alfred Rieber has published on wide-ranging topics, with first books on Stalin and French Communism, on autocracy, and on Russian entrepreneurs. Many books and many years later, it all seems to come together in the two-volume set in which *Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia* follows and concludes *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands: From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War* (2014). Built on a geo-cultural model that traces the constructive and destructive ebb and flood of borderland dynamics, the first volume covered the collapse of the Mongol empire into competing, expanding empires until they themselves collapsed, shattered by the force of nationalism and dissolved by the solvents of democracy. The first book also documents the special role of borderlands in these grand Eurasia-shaping events, offering simultaneously and repeatedly both internal and external challenge to imperial order. The first volume is a book about comparative empires with Rieber’s long and deep knowledge of Russia putting Moscow and its borderland concerns at the center of his analysis. It is exactly the kind of book that answers the burning question: how do we make Russian history speak to global history?

The second book, the one under review here, is something different altogether, although specifically called a “sequel” by Rieber (ix). Here, instead of the impersonal tides of borderland dynamics, it is the great dictator Joseph Stalin, who, due to the fateful contingencies of his upbringing and early career in the Caucasus, Rieber’s ‘shatterzone’ *par excellence*, grasped both intuitively and experientially the nature and function of borderlands. This finding was presented already in Rieber’s important *American Historical Review* article, “Stalin: Man of the Borderlands.” This book goes far beyond that article to show how what Stalin learned as a young man conditioned his ongoing preoccupation with the many nationalities and borderlands of the Soviet Union, both internal and external. Here we see Stalin both acting upon his own realm, as well as influencing his neighbors, making use of all the political levers in the borderland toolkit.

In revenge, the borderlands continued to raise their unceasing challenges, causing Stalin’s heavy hand to lay about him crushing resistance in ever expanding campaigns that came one after the other from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953. The hydra of nationalism kept the Soviet Union busy until the end, but never as violently as under Stalin. One is left wondering if high levels of violence are concomitant with borderlands or with Stalin. In short, we shift from a long-term analysis of impersonal geo-cultural forces in which human agency seems small to a Stalin-based analysis where the *vozhd’s* decisions are explained in terms of the borderland analysis that Stalin (and Rieber) know well. As a man in touch with these grand dynamics, Stalin as human agency, his command of detail and his decision-making authority that reached into every locus and issue, seems to take on an almost supernatural aura. Rieber puts this more eloquently: “The revolution and

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building a new state within the former tsarist empire could only be successful if the Bolsheviks could maintain
the proper balance of territorial, ethnic and class relations.” The “fine calibration” of this trio of trouble fed a
steady stream of millions of purged and deported into the Stalinist penal system from 1927 to 1953,
including the dreaded GULAG. For this whole period, The NKVD carried out operatsii from Mongolia to
Poland, from Estonia to Harbin, from the Far North to the Far East.

In the end after 400 pages of rich empirical fare, Rieber leaves us with a flexible model about the interaction
of Stalin’s “inner and outer perimeters.” (283) This is more than a simple explanatory device—it is supposed
to substitute for Stalin’s not having written or discussed his ultimate “master plan…for the political future of
the borderlands in postwar Eurasia beyond the new Soviet frontier” (283). This concept is also expressed in
four zones (404-406). But Rieber is cautious in his description of the model: “This analysis is not to suggest
that the appearance of these zones was in any way predetermined, or even that they were envisaged in this way
by Stalin or the local Communist parties. Rather it represents a conceptual scheme that reflects real power
relationships on the ground within the context of Stalin’s general thinking about the role of borderlands and
the outer world, which may be traced back to his early revolutionary career and experiences in the civil war”
(407). Rieber also makes efforts to factor in Marxist-Leninism by noting that “Stalin’s pragmatism was the
pragmatism of a Marxist-Leninist tempered by his grasp of the historical foundations of Russia’s status as a
great power” (285). But sometimes the Marxist part of the world view and the “borderland thesis” (34) run
counter to each other, as in the failure to find a Marxist explanation for Soviet hegemony throughout Eurasia
in the years following World War II. (407)

With this model in place, Rieber is able to perform a tour d’horizon around the many borders of the Soviet
Union to analyze the simple principles on which Stalin’s boundary alterations rested. The need for bases and
other geographic features that improved the defense of Soviet territory was at the top of the list. The desire to
include trans-border areas with inhabitants of the same ethnicity as the nearest Soviet neighbors came next.
Finally, the need for friendly governments was never left to chance. (322) Of course, the list of losses from
World War I and the Civil War also provided ready-made irredata cum desiderata, so the functional and
historical explanations need to be reconciled, but that seems both doable and worthwhile.

One might complain that Rieber exaggerates the importance of borderlands for Stalin for certainly, Stalin,
one of the most powerful statesmen in the world, had many other matters to attend to, both domestic and
foreign. However, Rieber’s exhaustive evidence clarifies that Stalin was deeply interested in every detail of
every border. This is a strong argument in favor of giving a larger place to borderland issues in the dominant
narrative of Stalin’s rule. Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia is a very rich text and readers from
many fields and area studies will find useful information to mine.
The reviews of *Stalin and the Struggle for Supremacy in Eurasia* by Geoffrey Roberts and David Wolff present a welcome opportunity to thank both scholars, themselves specialists in Soviet foreign policy, for their generous appreciation of my work. In my view, they succeeded admirably in summarizing the main points of my interpretation and recognizing its originality. In particular, I am grateful to David Wolff for having pointed out the thematic continuity that links this book to its predecessor, *The Struggle for the Eurasian Borderlands. From the Rise of Early Modern Empires to the End of the First World War*. Special thanks to Geoffrey Roberts as well for his deep engagement with the borderland thesis, clearly drawing out those implications for General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin’s foreign and domestic policy which I sought to stress.

If there is any general reservation shared by both historians, it is the suggestion that I may have exaggerated the role of the borderlands as the key to understanding many dimensions of Stalin’s policies, although I can hardly object to Roberts’s neat turn of phrase that it dazzles as well as illuminates! Admittedly the thesis is strongly argued. This reflects my conviction that it serves both a methodological and historiographical purpose. It combines two perspectives that I have advanced over the years in analyzing the relationship between Stalin’s world view and the “persistent factors” well summarized by Roberts. To put it another way, the borderland thesis seeks to illuminate the dynamic interaction of agency and structure. Beyond that, a strong argument is required, in my view, to challenge the reigning orthodoxies in the field of Soviet foreign policy which rely in their turn on two basic approaches. Either they overstate the ideological or the *realpolitik* imperative, defined respectively as Marxism-Leninism and geo-politics. What I have attempted to do is not so much to refute these approaches as refine and re-cast them. My aim is to demonstrate how Stalin shaped his own ideology rather than simply having adopted the internationalist outlook of Marxism-Leninism. It was a mix of Marxist theory filtered through Russia, re-shaped in part by the leader of the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, and forged in Stalin’s early revolutionary experiences – his apprenticeship as he once called it – in a ‘shatter zone’ where ethnic and class factors jostled one another. It was then tempered in the cauldron of civil war and intervention which demonstrated from his perspective the close inter-relationship between domestic and foreign enemies colluding on the periphery of the Great Russian core, that is the borderlands, to oppose Soviet power.

At the same time, I sought to demonstrate how Stalin’s brand of *realpolitik* was rooted in his concept of the ‘balance of forces.’ His view of the highest stage of capitalism that made war inevitable between two hostile imperialist camps provided him with a series of policy options. He could align himself with one or the other camp or withdraw into isolation and await a favorable opportunity to intervene in the struggle between the two. These tactics played out in his choices, first of quasi autarky represented by the initial phase of socialism in one country, then of collective security, and on to deal-making with Nazi Germany and Imperialist Japan. When his hand was forced by the Nazi invasion, he embraced the Grand Alliance by promoting an idea unprecedented in Marxist-Leninist theory of a war of freedom-loving people against fascism. Finally, he reverted to a position of quasi-autarchy in the postwar world, when he faced a ‘Western bloc,’ by constructing a series of defenses under the banner of socialist encirclement. To be sure, Stalin chose each option under

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strong external pressures, but his reactions to these pressures were informed by his world view, guided by his
perception of the greater enemy, the one which seemed to present the most immediate threat to his control
over the borderlands. As I sought to demonstrate in the previous book on *Struggle for the Eurasian
Borderlands*, his strategy of shifting back and forth between rival coalitions was a standard practice of tsarist
diplomats and statesmen seeking to align themselves in diplomacy and war with the powers which represented
the least danger to imperial rule.

In the interwar period, too, other masters of Soviet diplomacy like Commissars of Foreign Affairs Georgy
Chicherin and Maxim Litvinov also sided with one or a group of powers in Europe and Asia to prevent them
from uniting against the Soviet Union. While Chicherin favored lining up with Germany and Litvinov with
Britain, Stalin did not allow himself the luxury of personal preferences. Another tactical ploy of Stalin’s that
recalls a similar practice of imperial diplomacy was the cultivation of a ‘Russian party’ in the domestic
political arena of neighboring states in order to promote Russian interests. Originally introduced in managing
nomadic, tribal politics, eighteenth-century Russian policy makers applied it in their relations with Sweden
and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; in the nineteenth century the same device was used in the Balkan
and Eastern Anatolian (Armenian) provinces of the Ottoman Empire and the northern tier of the Qing
Empire (Xinjiang, Mongolia, Manchuria). For this reason I called Stalin “the last of the steppe politicians”
(262). For him “the Russian parties” were the local Communists. When I wrote that Stalin did not really
understand the international system, I did not mean that he lacked skills as a diplomat; he was a shrewd horse
trader. But he was also devious, masking his real intentions, and he failed to comprehend that he could not
claim to be part of the international community and at the same time conspire to undermine it without
generating a hostile response. This was one contradiction even Stalin was unable to resolve. Litvinov was
right: Stalin did not understand the West.

This brings me to the issue of Stalin’s manipulation of foreign Communist parties. Once brought under his
control by the late twenties, they were employed *primarily* to promote or oppose policies in their own
countries that would affect the building of socialism in the Soviet Union rather than launching their own
revolutions. He was determined to convert the Soviet Union into the base for spreading revolution abroad.
This was an inversion of the original Bolshevik thesis that the success of the socialist revolution in Russia
depended on the outbreak of revolutions in the advanced capitalist countries. Roberts finds my interpretation
of socialism in one country “a bit of a stretch.” But I do not anywhere state that this meant Stalin gave up the
idea of proletarian world revolution. In his concept its realization simply receded in time and space. That is, it
would have to await the completion of an advanced stage in the building socialism in the Soviet Union and its
initial successes would have to take place in the neighboring agrarian states with a small proletarian
population. This meant in turn, as he made clear to the Polish and German Communists after the war, that
they would not have to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. The Soviet Union had already gone through
that experience and was now in a position to act as a substitute in assuring the ultimate success of their
revolutions. But they would have to pass through an intermediate stage of a ‘new’ or ‘popular democracy.’
Nevertheless, despite his public advocacy of ‘national roads to socialism,’ Stalin continued to mistrust any
signs of deviation from the course he envisaged for them. This is why he suspected both the Yugoslav and
Chinese Communists for having shifted their mass base from the proletariat to the peasantry. At the other
ideological extreme in the postwar era, he found the French and Italian parties culpable of ‘parliamentarism.’
But when they unleashed mass strikes in 1949, their object was not to launch a proletarian revolution but to
cripple the implementation of the Marshall Plan.
To return for a moment to the question of an overstated thesis, I would like to pay homage to another recent work, Sabine Dullin’s admirable recent monograph, *La frontière épasse*, which also highlights the role of the borderlands in Soviet foreign policy, under a different rubric, that of ‘thick frontiers.’ Unfortunately, her work appeared too late for me to incorporate its findings into my work. Although Dullin places less emphasis on the domestic aspects of the defense of the frontiers, she makes clear the connection between Stalin’s nationality policy and his foreign policy, noting that after 1940 a triple frontier separated the Soviet Union from Europe. And she concludes that “The study of the Soviet frontier before 1940 thus makes it possible to separate out the elements of a matrix illuminating the subsequent evolution of the Cold War, the Soviet bloc and the Iron Curtain.”

As a modification and replacement for the “borderlands thesis” Roberts proposes that “Stalin’s foreign policy was rather a tapestry woven from many different threads.” What are these threads? Roberts notes that “Borderlands was only one facet – albeit a highly important one – of his postwar conspectus.” If we turn to the question of the potential of revolution in the colonial world, far removed from Soviet frontiers we find few new threads; Stalin had very little to say about this. The Soviet press made only occasional references to Indo-China during the war or even its immediate aftermath. In contrast to the French Communist Party, Moscow expressed doubts that the March 23, 1945 declaration of the French Provisional Government which defined Indo-China as “a free state with its own government, parliament, army and finances” within the French Union was only an offer of “artificial autonomy.” This view was reiterated in one of the few postwar books on Indo-China published in the Soviet Union. But the main external support for the August 1945 Revolution that proclaimed Vietnamese independence and established the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, came from the U.S. Office of Strategic Services officers on the ground. As for the Russians, nothing was forthcoming. As one Vietnamese Communist put it, “The Russians are nationalists for Russia first and above all. They would be interested in us only if we served some purpose of theirs. Right now we do not seem to serve any such purpose.” The founding members of the Cominform in 1948 did not include the Communist parties of any non-European state in sharp contrast to the world wide membership of Communist parties in the Comintern. As I pointed out in my book, Stalin’s interest in Iran and China was focused on obtaining influence in the borderlands of Azerbaizhan, Xinjiang, Outer Mongolia, and Manchuria. That the Iranian and Chinese Communists perceived themselves as engaged in a struggle for power was of much less interest to him. They were useful bargaining chips in his dealings with the nationalist governments and they deeply resented his indifference. By adopting a rather euro-centered perspective, Roberts lets slip from view these Middle Eastern and Asian confirmations of the “borderland thesis.” After Stalin’s death, it remained for his

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successors, especially Nikita Khrushchev to revive the Leninist orthodoxy and provide strong diplomatic and military support for national independence movements in Asia and Africa.

Both Wolff and Roberts suggest that Stalin had other things on his mind than the borderlands. I would be the first to agree. But I was not writing a biography of Stalin, but a study of his foreign policy. To be sure, Stalin’s brutal repression of his Bolshevik rivals, the Gulag system, and his cultural policies form important parts of his dark legacy; so too does his military leadership that was so thoroughly covered by Roberts in his book *Stalin’s Wars*. But these areas fall mainly outside my purview. Perhaps I should have stated in my preface what the book was not about. The only misrepresentation I found in these two reviews was Roberts’s statement that “Rieber’s book gives the impression that the borderlands were a singular, consuming passion for Stalin.” In his otherwise balanced critique, this sentence strikes a jarring note especially when compared to Roberts’s earlier evaluation of the borderland thesis as “complex and multi-layered.” Any historian worthy of the name recognizes that a multiplicity of causal factors as well as areas of obscurity must be acknowledged in studying men and events as complex as Stalin and his times. This I hope I have done. In addition, if I have at the same time opened up a new perspective on a major driving force behind the formation of Soviet foreign policy, as both reviewers generously suggest, then I will rest content with the result.

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