

0:00

joseph stalin and adolf hitler

0:03

with us today a guest who can talk about

0:05

the relationship of both

0:07

with deep knowledge stephen cotkin

0:10

on uncommon knowledge now

0:22

welcome to uncommon knowledge i'm peter

0:24

robinson

0:25

the son of a factory worker stephen

0:27

cotkin attended

0:29

rochester university then came to the

0:31

university of california at berkeley

0:33

where he learned russian

0:34

developed a fascination with soviet

0:36

history and earned a doctorate

0:39

dr kotkin is now and has been for three

0:41

decades a professor of history at

0:42

princeton

0:43

he is also a fellow here at the hoover

0:45

institution at stanford university

0:47

i should add by the way that we're

0:48

shooting here today in the
0:50
auditorium at the treytel building a new
0:52
building
0:53
of the hoover institution here at
0:55
stanford in 2014 dr cotkin published
0:58
stalin paradoxes of power 1878-1928
1:02
the first volume of his projected
1:04
three-volume biography of joseph stalin
1:07
now he has published the second volume
1:10
stalin
1:10
waiting for hitler 1929-1941
1:15
in part one of our conversation we
1:17
talked about collectivization
1:20
and the great terror now we come to
1:23
joseph stalin and adolf hitler
1:26
hitler becomes chancellor stephen in
1:28
1933
1:30
and it becomes clear within months that
1:32
he is rearming
1:33
and aggressive you write in stalin
1:36
waiting for hitler
1:37
stalin was defiant toward the western
1:39

powers and solicitous

1:41

toward hitler's germany but fearful of

1:44

an anti-soviet coalition

1:46

incorporating nazi germany too the

1:48

resulting padre twa

1:51

chamberlain and great britain hitler in

1:53

nazi germany and joseph stalin in the

1:55

ussr

1:56

became in effect a chamberlain versus

1:59

stalin

2:00

contest to win over adolf hitler

2:04

close quote hitler comes to power 1933

2:08

and much of the rest of the 30s

2:11

stalin is competing with chamberlain

2:15

for hitler's good graces yes explain

2:17

that thesis

2:18

so we have to go back momentarily

2:20

briefly to the versailles treaty of 1919

2:24

which is the treaty the the main treaty

2:26

it's not the only one it's the main

2:27

treaty

2:27

from world war one and that treaty

2:31

is a harsh punitive treaty towards
2:34
germany which is
2:35
labeled the aggressor in the first world
2:38
war
2:39
and has to pay punitive damages and
2:42
many restrictions are put on germany the
2:44
size of its army is very small
2:47
you can't have this it can't have that
2:50
the soviet union is not a party to the
2:52
treaty at all
2:53
they don't even invite them to the
2:55
treaty negotiations
2:57
so you have this anomalous moment the
2:59
only time
3:01
post bismarck since the unification of
3:03
germany
3:04
that both germany and russia are flat on
3:07
their back
3:09
that's why the british and the french
3:11
along with the americans are able to
3:13
impose this versailles treaty
3:15
on germany without any russian
3:17

participation

3:20

this treaty can't last even if

3:24

the british and the french have the

3:25

willpower to enforce it

3:28

it's going to come at some time it's

3:30

going gonna happen

3:31

that germany and or russia rises up

3:35

from its back again and becomes a power

3:37

it it so happened that both of them

3:40

germany and russia has the soviet became

3:43

great powers again within a single

3:45

generation

3:47

so here's the problem what do you do

3:49

with the treaty

3:50

that was imposed at this anomalous time

3:54

and now you have these two great powers

3:57

that

3:57

were either not part of the treaty at

4:00

all

4:00

or were the object of the treaty and

4:03

they want to revise this treaty

4:06

so the british spend the entire interwar

4:09

period

4:10

attempting to revise their own

4:12

versailles treaty

4:14

the french are opposed to the revision

4:18

and this complicates the factor the

4:20

french live

4:21

next to germany and suffered most of the

4:23

damage of world war one which was fought

4:25

not on british soil but on french soil

4:29

and then hitler comes into the picture

4:31

in 1933

4:32

and further complicates the story

4:34

because he begins to

4:36

violate the versailles restrictions

4:41

and what are the british going to do

4:42

they themselves have been trying to get

4:44

germany

4:45

inside a european security agreement

4:48

a kind of new deal where germany is

4:51

motivated to be part of this they're

4:54

incentivized

4:55

to behave properly and help uphold the

4:57

international order

4:59

rather than to try to revise it but then

5:01

hitler comes to power

5:02

and he begins proactively defiantly

5:06

to work against the versailles order

5:10

stalin on the other hand has a different

5:13

motivation from the british

5:16

the british want a deal that brings

5:18

germany back into europe

5:20

with a tweak a slight revision of her

5:22

side

5:24

stalin is against the entire

5:26

international order ipso facto

5:28

because it's imperialist capitalist or

5:31

imperialist as he calls it

5:33

but he's fearful that all the

5:36

imperialist powers

5:38

will form a coalition and gang up on him

5:42

to invade and overthrow his regime

5:45

and so he spends all his time

5:49

trying to prevent an imperialist or

5:52

all-capitalist coalition

5:55

he wants to drive a wedge between the
5:57
british and the french
5:58
and germany so he spends a lot of time
6:01
recruiting germany
6:03
away from the british and the french
6:05
this happens
6:06
before hitler comes to power in 1933 but
6:09
it continues
6:10
even after hitler's come to power hitler
6:13
is spouting
6:14
the most venomous
6:18
in his speeches the most venomous
6:20
anti-communist
6:21
anti-soviet anti-russian anti-bolshevik
6:26
verbiage imaginable and yet stalin still
6:30
because he's motivated by this
6:32
geopolitical understanding of preventing
6:34
an all-imperious coalition
6:37
stalin believes that if he can avoid an
6:40
attack on himself
6:43
and he can somehow get the imperialists
6:45
that is the capitalist powers
6:47

to go to war against each other he can

6:50

get a socialist revolution

6:52

in germany or in france

6:56

so his motivation and chamberlain's

6:59

motivation

7:01

coincide in the sense that both are

7:03

attempting to recruit hitler

7:05

away from the other and to to their side

7:08

but obviously for different motivations

7:11

and

7:12

on august 23rd 1929 1939 i beg you

7:17

no uh i beg your pardon yes of course

7:19

august 23 1939

7:21

right thank you uh it's amazing i can i

7:24

can put my

7:25

my pen down on any page in this book and

7:26

you can make sure i've got i've got the

7:28

date right that's the fact that you can

7:29

lift that book along is already

7:31

impressive

7:31

august 23rd 1939 joachim ribontrop

7:35

yes is in moscow yes and he signs

7:39

and vyacheslav molotov the soviet

7:41

foreign minister co-signs

7:43

a pact a non-aggression pact

7:46

yes between nazi germany and the soviet

7:50

union stalin is standing in the

7:51

background the pictures show

7:52

looking quite contented yes he was this

7:54

is the high point

7:56

of his diplomacy he's got hitler

7:59

promising not only that it won't invade

8:02

but that the soviet union may have bits

8:05

of

8:06

poland yes september 1st 1939

8:10

the nazis invade poland 17 days later

8:14

the soviets invade they also with within

8:17

a period of months

8:18

they pick up the baltic states south of

8:20

poland they move into best arabia

8:22

yes so they move westward across a whole

8:26

front yes they do as a result of this

8:28

non-aggression pact

8:32

so i guess what i'm the puzzle here

8:36

is to what extent stalin knows that

8:38

hitler hates him

8:39

that hitler has been talking about

8:42

slavic

8:42

subhumans he writes a phrase similar to

8:45

that in minecon yes

8:46

yes stalin wants to defeat the entire

8:49

west

8:50

and yet he's willing to he's willing to

8:53

make this agreement with

8:54

nazi germany on behalf of what the old

8:57

czarist impulse to

8:59

the impulse to retake old zara's

9:01

territory what is going on here

9:03

and how does it fit with in part one you

9:06

stressed again in a part one of this

9:08

conversation you stressed again and

9:09

again

9:09

stalin is a communist true believer how

9:12

does that pact

9:13

fit with his communist true belief

9:16

you're right the communists were shocked

9:18

at the pact and in fact many of them

9:21

repudiated their communist beliefs

9:24

because they thought that communism was

9:26

anti-fascist

9:27

to the core and the idea of doing a pact

9:31

with hitler the nazi whom they called a

9:34

fascist

9:35

was beyond belief it was very

9:37

disillusioning for many true believers

9:40

especially particularly or at least in

9:42

part in this country the communist party

9:43

in this country

9:44

was a terrible moment for them it was a

9:47

blow right it was an emotional

9:49

psychological blow

9:50

i have to say the pact among the nazis

9:52

was also a blow

9:54

because nazis were committed against

9:57

what they call judeo-bolshevism or the

10:00

communist regime and the idea of doing

10:02

even a temporary marriage of convenience

10:05

with the communists

10:06

was anathema to the nazi rank and file

10:08

also

10:10

but hitler and stalin didn't have to

10:13

stand before the voters and so they

10:16

could impose

10:17

these packs which seemed to vitiate

10:20

the ideological precepts but here's the

10:23

thinking once again

10:25

in the competition with chamberlain for

10:27

hitler's favor

10:28

stalin won and what does that mean that

10:32

meant that stalin

10:35

had been able to turn hitler westward

10:39

when hitler invaded poland on september

10:42

1st 1939

10:44

a few days after following some

10:46

hesitation

10:48

britain and france declared war

10:51

on nazi germany so stalin had

10:55

his intra-imperialist war it couldn't

10:58

have been more brilliant

11:00

from his point of view he would gain

11:02

just as you rightfully said

11:04

new territories which the czarist empire

11:07

had controlled but he had lost

11:10

the soviet union had lost during the

11:12

revolution and civil war they became

11:14

independent the three baltic countries

11:18

part of poland that part of what became

11:21

romania known as bessarabia

11:23

he recovered all those territories

11:26

moreover there was an economic dimension

11:29

to the pact

11:31

whereby stalin would trade raw materials

11:35

like grain and oil and

11:36

manganese and other minerals

11:40

metals to nazi germany in exchange for

11:44

the latest prototypes of the best

11:46

weapons germany was producing

11:49

so stalin was getting a cornucopia of

11:51

machine

11:52

tools and armaments which he could then

11:55

reproduce in his own factories

11:57

reverse engineer sometimes he even got

12:00

the blueprints and he didn't have to

12:01

reverse engineer

12:03

so the pact was extremely beneficial to

12:06

stalin

12:07

hitler had given up his leverage in the

12:10

negotiation

12:11

he wanted to invade poland

12:15

and britain and france had said that

12:17

they would defend poland's sovereignty

12:19

so hitler was facing the possibility of

12:22

a coalition

12:24

against himself of britain and france on

12:26

one side

12:27

and the soviet union on the other which

12:29

would have been a two-front war

12:31

so hitler desperately needed to

12:34

eliminate that possibility and he gave

12:37

stalin

12:38

a wonderful deal stalin essentially

12:41

dictated the terms

12:43

the big gain of all the gains was that

12:47

france and britain became the object

12:51

of nazi invasion of nazi warfare
12:55
so stalin looked like he won in the pact
12:57
a great
12:58
geopolitical victory and so from a
13:01
communist point of view peter it does
13:02
make sense
13:04
preventing the all-capitalist coalition
13:07
turning the capitalist war against
13:09
themselves
13:10
and then standing on the sidelines and
13:12
waiting to benefit because
13:14
the destruction will enable a socialist
13:16
revolution in the west
13:18
all right hitler moves west
13:22
he invades he goes through belgium he
13:24
takes france he drives the british
13:25
expeditionary and
13:27
the movie dunkirk presents that retreat
13:30
across the english channel is a great
13:32
british victory in fact it was a retreat
13:34
they've been driven from the continent
13:36
of europe
13:38

but then the game the game shifts or at

13:41

least hitler's thinking shifts

13:45

and he decides he's going to open a

13:47

second front after all

13:49

and of course as we know this book

13:53

this book ends on june 21st

13:57

1944 deep into the night hours

14:00

just a few hours before the nazis invade

14:04

which of course will open volume three

14:06

we want that volume quickly please

14:07

so do i but so we know as we read this

14:11

book

14:12

we know what's going to happen that

14:15

these nazis are going to put

14:16

three million troops against the soviet

14:19

union they're gone

14:20

three different they're going to go to

14:21

drive to the south they'll drive

14:22

straight at moscow

14:24

they'll drive up toward leningrad and

14:26

stalin will

14:27

reel and reel and reel and 20

14:30

million soviets are going to die in this

14:32

conflict

14:33

we know all that what this book shows

14:37

is that stalin misses all the signals

14:41

we know what's going to happen he misses

14:43

the signals

14:45

he does you you close

14:48

again it's absolutely fascinating and

14:51

thrilling

14:52

although tremendously annoying that you

14:54

can't turn the page and get on to the

14:55

invasion

14:56

we have to wait for volume three but you

14:57

close with the night before the invasion

15:00

and you make the the german invasion of

15:02

the soviet union

15:03

and you make the point stalin is almost

15:06

grudgingly his commanders see all kinds

15:09

of german activity

15:10

and he grudgingly permits the commanders

15:12

to to raise the

15:14

combat readiness of his troops but under

15:16

strict instructions

15:18

to avoid anything that might serve as a

15:20

provocation for the nazis

15:22

and a few hours after the germans give

15:25

the signal

15:26

to deploy and begin the invasion there's

15:30

a soviet train that crosses the border

15:32

carrying supplies for the germans

15:37

how did stalin miss it

15:40

we have to remember that's the great

15:42

question and it's very difficult

15:44

we have to remember though that stalin

15:46

built

15:47

a military power he spent a lot of time

15:50

in his office

15:52

known as the little corner inside the

15:54

kremlin

15:56

meeting with officials about military

15:59

factories about new armaments

16:01

about the latest and the greatest tanks

16:04

and planes and artillery

16:06

and even small arms and so

16:09

he had prepared this
16:12
was the greatest military
16:15
in size of any the soviet military in
16:18
1941
16:20
in history it had the most troops
16:23
it had the most tanks and planes not all
16:26
of them however
16:27
were up to date part of
16:30
soviet militarization because it had
16:32
started so early
16:34
in the early 1930s was that they had an
16:37
obsolete
16:38
tank park and obsolete planes
16:42
meaning they had been built years
16:44
earlier the technology had improved
16:47
but they still had those older ones in
16:50
their tank park
16:51
or on their airfields nonetheless he had
16:54
prepared
16:54
to fight a war however he was afraid
16:58
he was afraid of the german army he had
17:02
watched
17:03

them overrun poland

17:06

overrun like you said the low countries

17:09

and then

17:09

smash france six weeks france fell

17:13

here's stalin's thinking the germans are

17:16

going to become embroiled in a war in

17:18

the west

17:18

after all world war one lasted four

17:21

years in a couple of months

17:23

the idea that this would happen in six

17:26

weeks that a great power like france and

17:28

france was a great power with a gigantic

17:29

military

17:31

and great technology the idea that

17:33

france would fall so quickly was

17:36

really unthinkable to stall so things

17:38

had shifted on him and the pact

17:41

was no longer as brilliant after the

17:44

fall of france the entire thing was

17:46

predicated

17:48

on all the capitalists remaining at war

17:51

for a long period of time destroying

17:53

each other but instead the germans

17:56

destroyed

17:58

their french enemy and were still fully

18:02

intact and began to move their troops to

18:04

the eastern

18:06

border with the soviet union let's

18:08

remember when stalin's borders moved

18:10

west

18:11

in all that land he acquired the result

18:14

was now a border with nazi germany

18:18

and the german buildup was right

18:22

it was impossible to conceal and soviet

18:25

intelligence

18:26

reported on the build-up the storing of

18:30

gasoline near the border

18:33

the movement of tanks towards the border

18:36

the number of troops

18:38

up and down the border this was

18:40

information stalin was receiving you

18:41

have

18:42

you have a document you have a photocopy

18:44

of a document in here where stalin

18:46

receives an intelligence report that
18:47
there's trouble coming that the germans
18:49
are moving in
18:50
and he writes across it in the top you
18:52
can send this
18:53
tell this your officer that this to send
18:55
it to his and then there's an
18:56
expletive mother yeah uh this he's not
18:59
this is not information this is
19:00
disinformation
19:02
one of the things about intelligence is
19:05
that it's always contaminated
19:07
with information
19:11
which is not true known as
19:13
disinformation
19:14
right so we sweep up
19:18
electronically everything imaginable in
19:21
russia today
19:23
and we think that that electronic
19:25
surveillance of their cell phones and
19:27
their internet
19:28
and their landlines we think that that's
19:32

firsthand knowledge but the russians are

19:35

deliberately putting

19:37

false information into that stream in

19:40

order to confuse us

19:42

and a little bit of disinformation can

19:45

distract from

19:46

accurate information that you've

19:48

required

19:50

so this is what the nazis did to stalin

19:52

as well

19:53

they inserted obviously false

19:56

information

19:58

into the intelligence so he was getting

20:00

unbelievably good intelligence stalin

20:03

was

20:03

but it was contaminated by falsehoods

20:06

that he could

20:06

recognize and so this

20:10

led him to disbelieve the veracity of

20:13

the entire report

20:15

he couldn't pick out what was the

20:17

disinformation

20:19

and what was the accurate information

20:21

this contamination process was extremely

20:24

successful on the german side

20:26

moreover the germans planted fake

20:29

stories that were plausible

20:32

knowing stalin's psychology

20:36

how to explain the troop buildup the

20:38

first

20:39

explanation was that it was there

20:42

on the soviet eastern border in

20:44

southeastern europe

20:46

in order to attack british positions

20:49

in the middle east because the british

20:52

had still not capitulated

20:54

they couldn't dislodge nazi germany from

20:57

the continent

20:58

from the occupation of france but the

21:00

germans couldn't invade across the

21:02

channel

21:03

so the british were holding out so

21:06

the germans told stalin by implanting

21:10

the information

21:12

let's remember the soviets had the best

21:13

spy network in the world

21:16

which the germans suspected and so by

21:19

allowing whispering

21:20

of information they knew that it would

21:22

get back to stalin

21:24

so they told stalin that those troops in

21:26

southeastern europe on his border were

21:28

not to attack him

21:30

but they were to attack the british

21:32

positions in the middle east and

21:33

undermine

21:34

forced british capitulation that way

21:37

then they came up with a second story

21:41

the second story was that oh there won't

21:44

be an

21:44

invasion there's gonna be blackmail

21:48

the troops are there to intimidate so

21:51

that hitler can get what he wants

21:53

without fighting

21:55

so for example he wants ukraine

21:59

stalin will have to hand over the bread

22:01

basket

22:02

and industry of ukraine and so and if he

22:05

doesn't the troops will invade

22:07

so the blackmail theory so let me

22:09

capture stone so the book the book ends

22:12

i have one i have one more question

22:13

which

22:13

is dear to me because i really want to

22:15

hear what you have to say about this so

22:16

i want to get to this one last question

22:18

in

22:18

part two of our conversation but the

22:21

book ends this

22:22

wonderful apart from anything else

22:25

highly dramatic

22:26

but in the collectivization part and

22:29

then the section on the great terror

22:31

you be you can begin to get the feeling

22:33

that this man is just omnipotent

22:36

but as the book closes and he's confused

22:40

by the german disinformation yes

22:42

and he's believing what he wants to

22:44

believe yes you see a human being
22:47
uncertain well trapped so to speak by
22:51
his own patterns of thought yes
22:53
he's not omnipotent and he's about to
22:56
reel as volume three over yes
22:59
but here are my last my last couple of
23:01
questions about volume two
23:03
stalin waiting for hitler
23:06
this question he
23:09
pushes the country through famine and
23:11
collectivization then comes the great
23:13
terror when he eliminates
23:14
over 800 000 kills over 800 000 people
23:18
who are with him
23:19
yes how does he do it
23:22
at the human level and i have two two
23:25
two specific examples
23:27
vyacheslav molotov molotov's
23:31
own wife is arrested and she's sent into
23:34
internal exile and she
23:35
stays there yes until stalin dies
23:39
stalin keeps her in internal exile yes
23:41

and vyacheslav molotov

23:44

remains style loyal to stalin and to

23:47

stalin's memory

23:48

molotov is one of the last of the old

23:50

bolsheviks to die he lives until 1986

23:53

and never utters a word of regret or

23:55

disloyalty to joseph stalin you're right

23:58

stalin's personal assistant the one who

24:00

sits in the ante room and controls who's

24:02

going to go in to see him

24:04

chef thank you for pronouncing it

24:05

alexander poscrobishev

24:08

you got it stalin permits his wife

24:11

roscolbychev's wife to be imprisoned

24:15

and executed yeah and postrobi's chev

24:19

remains loyal to stalin during the

24:21

second world war he is working

24:23

20 hours a day with stalin and again he

24:25

dies

24:26

he dies in the 60s as i recall not a

24:28

word of regret

24:30

not a word of disloyalty this

24:33

is just incomprehensible

24:36

how yes to us it's very difficult to

24:40

understand

24:41

but let's remember once again stalin is

24:45

a communist

24:46

he's midwifing historical necessity

24:51

he doesn't have time nor should he

24:56

devote himself to worries about

24:59

morality pangs of conscience

25:02

individual victims who will forgive him

25:06

if if the revolution is overthrown

25:10

who will forgive him if he fails to

25:13

build a communist state

25:16

he will be guilty before history

25:19

for having failed in his historical duty

25:22

so everything becomes subsumed to this

25:25

and mass murder becomes justified

25:29

because it's part of the movement of

25:31

history and the supposed greater good of

25:33

humanity

25:34

we don't have any documents that show

25:37

second thoughts

25:38

that show stalin wondering if he should
25:41
have killed so many people
25:43
or feeling guilt about the peasants who
25:46
starved
25:47
the documents we have and they're very
25:49
voluminous
25:51
are about stalin not wanting to fall
25:54
short in building a great communist
25:57
power
25:59
and being angry at those who criticized
26:02
him
26:03
for doing so his minions they were in
26:06
awe of him stalin had capabilities
26:12
that they didn't have he had a diligence
26:17
he worked long hours he read hundreds of
26:21
documents a day
26:23
he was in charge of culture
26:26
the economy the political regime
26:30
international relations right imagine
26:34
if you are responsible for washington
26:37
d.c
26:39
new york city and hollywood
26:42

all at the same time one person and he

26:46

was able

26:47

to put in the time to be on top of his

26:50

brief

26:51

sure blunders mistakes limited horizons

26:54

but he was able to do it he was a

26:57

dictator

26:58

of immense aptitude and they saw that

27:02

firsthand

27:03

that he was advancing the cause he had

27:06

no harem

27:08

few mistresses he was utterly devoted

27:11

to the destruction of capitalism

27:15

sure a big story is what what the costs

27:18

are

27:19

the tremendous costs of eliminating

27:21

markets and private property

27:23

and how what we think what some leftists

27:26

think is the solution

27:27

is worse the elimination of

27:31

markets and property doesn't get you to

27:33

freedom yeah that's part of the story

27:35

but for stalin it was necessary
27:38
historically and for those around him
27:41
they shared that view with him
27:43
and they were in awe of his power i am
27:46
also
27:47
i don't have very much admiration for
27:49
stalin in many ways
27:51
he was this murderous mendacious
27:54
murderous and mendacious are too too
27:57
they don't even begin to describe
28:00
what he's like but if you're interested
28:02
in power
28:04
you're interested in how power is
28:06
accumulated and exercised and what the
28:08
consequences are
28:09
the subject of stalin is just
28:11
unbelievably deep it's bottomless
28:14
i've learned so many lessons about power
28:16
evil power
28:18
power that kills but power that also was
28:22
motivated
28:23
by ideals and those around him
28:26

look like opportunists and cynics but

28:29

they too believed in this dream

28:31

of a better world it was a false god

28:34

a false dream and the world wasn't

28:37

better

28:37

and we know that now and some of them

28:40

figured that out along the way

28:42

but in the meantime this guy stalin was

28:45

carrying

28:46

all of this on his back stephen cotkin

28:50

the author of waiting for hitler

28:53

1929-1941

28:55

thank you for part two of our

28:56

conversation

28:58

by the way i said that was the last

29:00

question it's not what's the publication

29:01

date

29:02

of volume three you were right the

29:05

previous question was the last question

29:08

stephen thank you thank you for uncommon

29:11

knowledge on the hoover institution

29:12

i'm peter robinson

29:30

you