Losurdo’s Stalin

written by Javier Sethness | February 4, 2026

The late Italian Marxist Domenico Losurdo’s *Stalin: History and Critique of a Black Legend* exalts and even deifies the long-ruling Soviet despot Joseph Stalin (1924–1953). Indeed, the text’s cover and inside cover art strikingly depict Stalin with a halo, and the book’s contents often read like a “Greatest Hits for Tankies.” In effect, Losurdo likens Stalin to a god threatened with desecration by wayward rivals like Lev Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin, and Nikita Khrushchev. As critic Ross Wolfe observes, the author thus promotes “nothing less than the (re)entry of Stalinism into the realm of philosophy, a new school of falsification, all in service of justifying the course history has taken.”[1]

In his effort to contest his subject’s demonization by the West, Losurdo suggests that this infamous general secretary of the Soviet Politburo has been unfairly tarred with a “Black Legend” of sorts. Yet, as we will see below, there is plenty of evidence for such a “Black Legend” in Stalin’s case, just as there is a plethora of evidence for the parallel historical crimes of the Spanish Empire (1492–1976). Like neo-Stalinists, present-day apologists for this empire, including members of Spain’s Popular Party and Vox, largely dismiss critical and realistic discussions of Spain’s colonial past as a distorted *Leyenda negra* (“Black Legend”) opportunistically promoted by contemporary competitors like the British Empire.

Along these lines, *Stalin* is full of questionable praise for its object of study. Losurdo describes Stalin as the “eminent theorist of the national question,” based on the Bolshevik’s authoring “an essay of undeniable theoretical value [sic] (*Marxism and the National Question*)” (1913). Losurdo touts the Soviet Union’s rapid industrialization and modernization under Stalin’s “developmentalist dictatorship.” He does so, despite acknowledging that these policies involved the imposition of highly anti-egalitarian industrial policies, an abandonment of class struggle in favor of vastly expanded production, and the further empowerment of a bureaucratic-managerial elite. Moreover, the author misleadingly claims that Stalin “was committed to helping the [Second] Spanish Republic” when it came under attack from Francisco Franco’s Nationalist rebellion in 1936. Above all, Losurdo commends Stalin’s leadership during World War II, especially Operation Barbarossa, the code name for Nazi Germany’s devastating 1941 attack on the Soviet Union—the largest invasion force in history![2]

In his dubious attempt at historical salvage in *Stalin*, Losurdo laments the general secretary’s reduction to a “scapegoat” for the “tragedy and horror of Soviet Russia.”[3] By contrast, in our review here, we will provide a more critical account, based on the historical record, plus anarchist and socialist commentaries. We will then turn to reflecting on the paradoxical convergences linking Losurdo’s anti-imperialism with anarchism and Third-Camp socialism. In closing, we will consider

some of the ominous present-day echoes of Stalinism in the toxic phenomenon of campism, especially as seen in the breakdown in left-wing solidarity with Ukrainians under genocidal attack by the Russian State.

Losurdo and Stalin

Ideologically, *Stalin* denies, distorts, and omits key parts of Stalin's legacy. The idea, peddled by Losurdo, that Stalin sought to aid the beleaguered Second Spanish Republic is belied by the fact that he looted its treasury through fraudulent arms sales, often sending Republican forces useless weapons without ammunition. In reality, rather than defeating Franco per se, Stalin's intervention in the Spanish Civil War was aimed at controlling the course of events and keeping the revolutionary anarchists and Trotskyists in check.[4] Even such a pro-Soviet historian as E. H. Carr acknowledges that the Republic had become "the puppet of Moscow" before its fall to Nationalist forces in 1939.[5]

Notably, as well, Losurdo applauds Stalin for supporting the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, given that the Soviet Union was the first State to formally recognize Israel. This is despite the fact that the creation of the Jewish State involved the mass-dispossession and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, in an event known as the Nakba, which undoubtedly persists, as seen in the Gaza genocide.[6] Although Losurdo opens *Stalin* by discussing public mourning for the Soviet leader in Israel after his death in 1953, he fails to disclose that, besides legitimizing the Jewish State diplomatically, Stalin directly armed and trained Israel's nascent military, which was engaged then (as now) in war crimes against Palestinians.[7] In parallel to this lapse, Losurdo omits that Stalin had the Jewish Soviet anti-fascist Solomon Mikhoels killed in 1948, so as to prevent the latter from bringing to light the wartime genocide of Soviet Jews by the Nazis.[8]

Furthermore, Losurdo downplays Stalin's responsibility for the Holodomor famine in Ukraine (1932–1933). He cites bogus charges from the last of the rigged Moscow Trials (1936–1938) to discredit Bukharin, Stalin's Bolshevik rival, target, and eventual victim. He misrepresents Stalin's misrule prior to, and at the start of, Operation Barbarossa. In particular, Losurdo dismisses as fake the widespread reporting that the so-called Man of Steel suffered a nervous breakdown and fled Moscow for his dacha upon learning of the Nazi incursion, and he broadly resists squaring with the fascist and Russian-chauvinist dimensions of Stalinism itself, as identified by Trotsky, the anarchist Voline, the theologian Nikolai Berdyaev, and socialist Rohini Hensman, among others.[9]

Losurdo likewise ignores how Stalin's Terror (1936–1938) undermined military readiness ahead of the long-anticipated Nazi invasion, which Hitler had outlined as early as in *Mein Kampf* (1925). Historians Catherine Evtuhov and colleagues explain that the Stalinist Terror involved the execution of "60 percent of the marshals," around 90 percent of "the highest army commanders, all the admirals, about 90 percent of corps commanders," and several "divisional and brigadier generals." Rather than acknowledge any of the Soviet Union's early losses during the German blitzkrieg, either—from the fall of Minsk and Kyiv to the immediate destruction of one-fourth of the Soviet air force—Losurdo cheers on Stalin's supposed military genius.[10]

The author only fleetingly acknowledges the notorious Nazi-Soviet Pact that was signed just prior to Hitler's invasion of Poland and the start of World War II, claiming at once that Moscow had no other choice, but also, that Stalin somehow atoned for this error by going on to lead the Red Army in repelling and defeating Hitler.[11] In reality, he omits that this deal involved Stalin leasing the Germans a secret U-boat base in Murmansk; supplying the Nazi war-machine with wheat, oil, and war matériel; and handing over German Communists to Hitler's forces.[12] More lucidly than Losurdo, then, Hensman outright calls Stalin a "Nazi collaborator."[13]

In a similar vein, while Losurdo does briefly discuss the "so-called Holodomor" in Ukraine, only to

dismiss it as a Ukrainian-nationalist myth, he guards silence about the similarly devastating famine that affected Kazakhs around the same time, owing—like Holodomor—to Stalinist policies of requisition and forcible collectivization, combined with poor climate conditions.[14] He accurately observes that the "policy of 'terrorist famine' with which Stalin is accused runs deep through the history of the West," yet this truth can hardly be used to excuse Stalin's crimes, as the author apparently seeks to do. While he aptly decries the "deportation of the Cherokee people ordered by Andrew Jackson," Losurdo only indirectly mentions the mass-deportations of Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Meskhetians, Kalmyks, and other ethno-religious minorities ordered by Stalin during World War II.[15]

Stalin: A Critique

A more critical account of Stalin might emphasize that, rather than build socialism, the general secretary actually vastly accelerated the construction of state capitalism in the Soviet Union. He did so by imposing economic policies of "primitive socialist accumulation," forcible collectivization of agriculture, super-exploitation of the working class, and "Five-Year Plans" mandating State-led industrial expansion and military modernization. In reality, Soviet society even under Stalin's predecessor Vladimir Lenin was deeply marked by class divisions between workers and a bureaucratic elite, with the working class reduced to a new serfdom due to domination by a single, all-encompassing employer (otherwise known as a monopsony): namely, the Soviet State.[16] Stalin's reign only entrenched such class divisions more deeply, while intensifying the war waged by the Kremlin against the peasantry. As such, in *Nationalism and Culture* (1937), the German anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker declares that "[m]onopoly of power must disappear, together with monopoly of property," denouncing a "new absolutism" and "new economic feudalism" that have arisen in the Soviet Union.[17]

Undoubtedly, as Hensman and the late historian Martin Malia discuss, Stalin built up a "State Capitalist Empire" while rehabilitating Tsarism, Russian patriotism, heterosexism, and patriarchy. He did so, as the late Trotskyist Chris Harman notes, while exploiting millions of enslaved workers in the Gulag.[18] According to Malia, Stalin's invention and mobilization of new orthodoxies—particularly his framing of all of his rivals, from the anarchists, "the Populists[,] and the Mensheviks to the Trotskyites," as irredeemable enemies of the people—went hand-in-hand with his persecution and mass killings of his opponents, including nearly all of the "Old Bolsheviks," and even many of his own followers.[19] George Orwell satirizes such Stalinist dynamics in his well-known dystopian science-fiction novel *1984* (1948), which Sandra Newman recently adapted as *Julia* (2023), hence providing a much-needed feminist take on the original cautionary tale.

The Third Camp

Potentially, against the author's best intentions, some of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist points Losurdo raises in *Stalin* could jibe with anarchism and Third-Camp socialism, which both oppose the hegemony of Washington *and* Moscow. Despite all the aforementioned disgraces, Losurdo actually concedes that Lenin and Stalin's regimes were "ruthless […] dictatorship[s]," that Stalin fashioned himself after the infamous Tsar Peter the Great, and that Stalin's rule led to the "advent of autocracy." To his credit, if only in passing, Losurdo expresses sympathy for political prisoners incarcerated in the Gulag, and he acknowledges the criminality of the 1940 Katyn massacre of thousands of Polish officers and prisoners of war, which was carried out on Stalin's orders by the NKVD (predecessor of the KGB).

In an attempt to avoid contemplating Stalin in a vacuum, however, Losurdo makes important criticisms of the wide-ranging contemporary "concentrationary universe" created by Western imperialism. He points to a plethora of murderous and genocidal violence on the part of Euro-

Americans, as seen during British imperial rule over India, Ireland, and Iraq; the British military repression of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya; the antebellum and Jim Crow U.S. South; the settler-colonial genocides of Indigenous peoples in Australia and North America; the counter-insurgent war waged by the United States in the Philippines; the U.S. mass-internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II; the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the war on Cambodia—among other crimes perpetrated by the nominally liberal United States and United Kingdom.[21] Losurdo rightly stresses that the Soviet Gulag echoed many similar Western concentrationary spaces, yet, to reiterate, two wrongs do not make a right.

In this sense, to contemplate Losurdo's emphasis on the racial slavery and imperialism practiced by Western liberal societies, while engaging in a critical reading of the same author's apologia for Stalin, may lead one to a proper political and philosophical balance—that is, one in favor of the Third Camp.[22] Along these lines, we should consider the horrors of Stalinism, along with Losurdo's view—shared with Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, and others—that liberalism effectively underwrote Nazi Germany, without overlooking the arguments made by Rocker and Critical Theorists (including Marcuse) that liberalism dialectically also underpins the libertarianism of anarchism and Marxism.[23]

Conclusion: Stalinism, Campism, and the Russo-Ukrainian War

The Stalinist concept of "socialism in one country"—or, rather, one *empire*—is intimately connected with the toxic phenomenon of pseudo-anti-imperialism in our time. Otherwise known as campists—in an allusion to one's siding with either the "First" (Western) or "Second" (Soviet/Eastern) World, or Camp—pseudo-anti-imperialists usually promote the cause of the Second Camp against the First, as is reflected in their apologia for Russia, China, Iran, and Syria's former Assad regime, among other bureaucratic-authoritarian rivals of the West.[24] In subscribing to campism, pseudo-anti-imperialists clearly contradict the anarchist and socialist imperatives of internationalism, egalitarianism, and working-class self-emancipation.

Once disconnected from such fundamental principles, campists readily proceed with the promotion of deadly disinformation that serves their cause, such as denialism over Assad's use of chemical weapons during the Syrian Civil War or China's present-day genocide of Uyghurs, Tibetans, and other ethno-religious minorities. They typically do so, while de-emphasizing and distracting from undeniable everyday atrocities—especially Russia's genocidal war on Ukraine. Such practices echo the past denial of Stalinist crimes, as evinced in Losurdo's book, along with the "continuous and often hefty leftist support" the Soviet regime enjoyed, in the words of Eric Heinze—not to mention Russian President Vladimir Putin's ongoing blatant rehabilitation of Stalin's legacy.[25]

At a basic level, it is undeniable that the plight of Ukrainians at the hands of the Russian military has much in common with that of Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli armed forces. Still, while present-day leftist critics of the First Camp do well to center the horrors and injustices of the Gaza genocide, many overlook the parallel genocide in Ukraine—perhaps due to a mistaken sense that this atrocious war is either unremarkable or "constructive," its victims "unworthy." While this formulation is taken from Edward S. Herman, an unrepentant second-campist who used it to criticize Western media and politicians, it can help to illustrate the extent of the problem of leftist denialism, when the shoe is proverbially on the other foot. Other factors inhibiting an unequivocal left-wing embrace of the Ukrainian cause likely include a combination of indifference or hostility to national self-determination in Eastern Europe, and deference to the Kremlin, perpetrator of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which ranks highly within the Second Camp.[26]

By contrast, as remedy, we must resist the dehumanization, militarism, and imperialism of both camps, while supporting the cause of the anti-authoritarian, internationalist Third Camp as best we

can.

notes

1. Ross Wolfe, “Against Losurdo,” *New International*, Sept. 1, 2025.

2. Domenico Losurdo, *Stalin: History and Critique of a Black Legend*, trans. Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro and Henry Hakamäki (Seattle: Iskra Books, 2023), 6, 14–*15, 28,* 34, 54–55, 101, 124, 136, 157.

3. Ibid., 117.

4. Ronald Radosh et al., *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), xvii, xxiv, xxx.

5. Losurdo 2023, 6; E. H. Carr, *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Pantheon, 1984), 31.

6. Losurdo 2023, 216–21.

7. Ross Wolfe, “Losurdo’s Lies,” *New International*, Sept. 4, 2025.

8. Rohini Hensman, *Indefensible: Democracy, Counterrevolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 63.

9. Losurdo 2023, 15–16, 43, 68, 78–84, 117, 190–96, 282–84; Voline, *The Unknown Revolution* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1975), 350–51; Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 147; Catherine Evtuhov et al., *A History of Russia: Peoples, Legends, Events, Forces* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 703; Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Mind of Stalin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988), 110–11; Hensman, 15, 35–36, 47.

10. Evtuhov et al., 673, 702–4; David Reynolds, “Stalin’s weakness almost cost him the War,” *Telegraph*, June 13, 2011; Losurdo 2023, 218.

11. Losurdo 2023, 27–28, 142, 183.

12. Laurence Rees, *WWII Behind Closed Doors: talin, The Nazis and The West* (London: BBC Books, 2008); Evtuhov et al., 701–2; Chris Harman, *A People’s History of the World* (London: Verso, 2017), 524.

13. Hensman, 36.

14. Losurdo 2023, 191 (emphasis in original); Evtuhov et al., 669.

15. Losurdo 2023, 10, 13, 29, 44–47, 175, 195–96, 200, 267; Evtuhov et al., 710–11; Hensman 36.

16. Voline, 355–415.

17. Rudolf Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture*, trans. Ray E. Chase (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1998), 535, 545–46.

18. Hensman, 32–36, 62; Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 235–36; Chris Harman, “From Trotsky to state capitalism,” *Marxists Against Stalinism* (London: Resistance Books, 2022), 37.

19. Malia, *228–68*.

20. Losurdo 2023, 123, 135, 266–67, 271–72, 286, 318.

21. Ibid., 151–60, 170–76, 196–200, 256–69, 300–308.

22. Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2014), 1–34.

23. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1968); Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 21; Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 3–42, and *Marxism, Revolution, and Utopia: Collected Papers Volume 6*, eds. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (London: Routledge, 2014), 340–41.

24. Hensman.

25. Eric Heinze, "Critical Theory and Memory Politics: Leftist Autocritique after the Ukraine War," *International Journal of Law in Context* vol. 20, no. 2 (2024), 184–203.

26. Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, *The Politics of Genocide* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 103 (emphasis in original); Heinze.