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Original paper



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Joseph Stalin's Activities in the Field of Foreign Policy and Diplomacy on the Eve of the Great Patriotic War

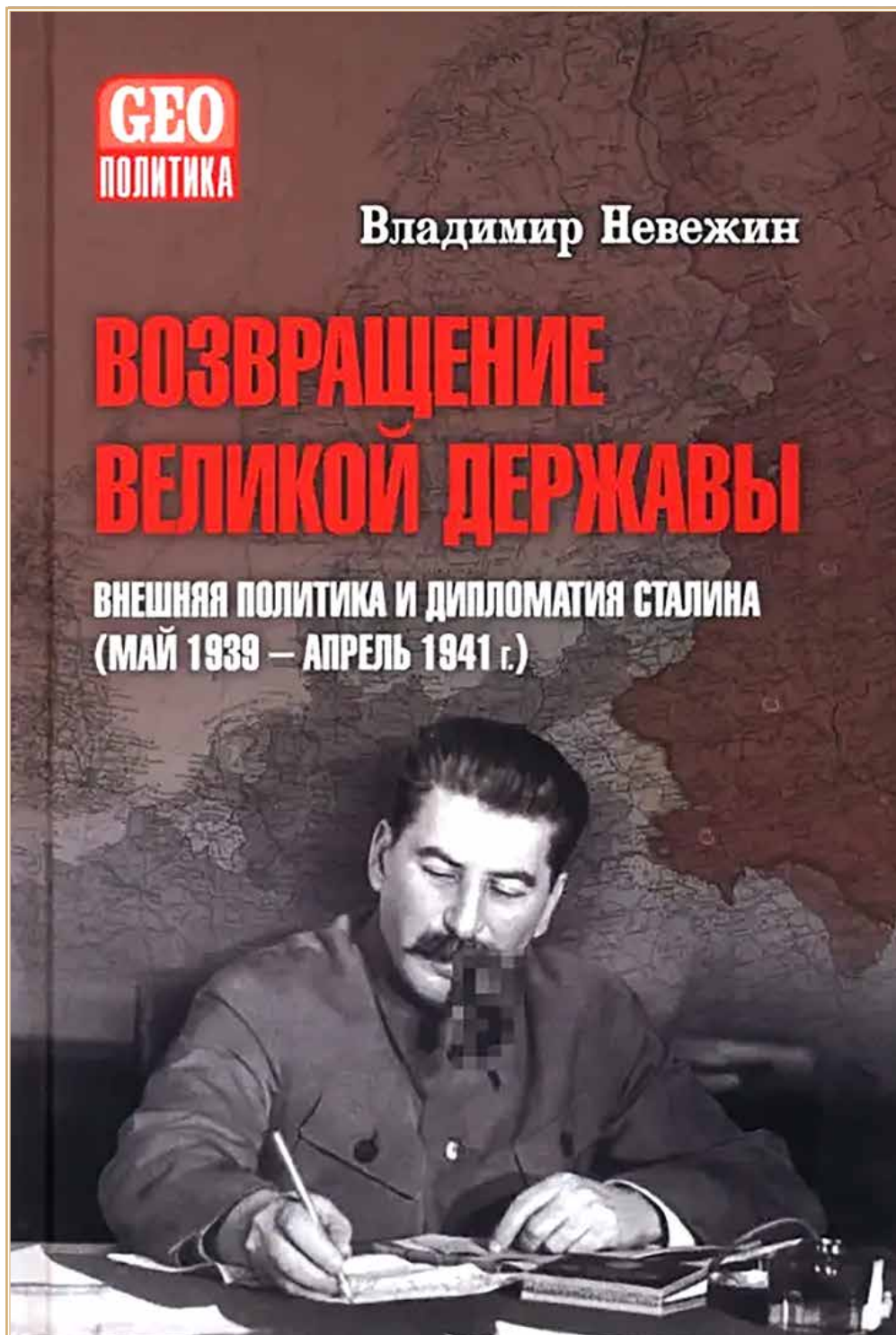
**Review of the monograph by Vladimir A. Nevezhin
«The Return of a Great Power: Stalin's Foreign Policy
and Diplomacy (May 1939 – April 1941)».**

Moscow: Veche, 2025. 464 pp.

Abstract

In his review, Dr. Vartumyan rightly notes that Dr. Nevezhin's new book is written on a topical subject and makes use of a large body of diverse archival materials. Unfortunately, he does not specify exactly what this topicality consists of.

The author's research style — attention to details that may sometimes seem insignificant but that make it possible to better understand major, large-scale events — can be explained both by the education he received at Moscow State Institute for History and Archives (now Russian State University for the Hu-



manities, RSUH) and by his extensive experience of practical research work at the Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, where he wrote his doctoral dissertation (1999), taking an important place among experts on the history of the USSR in the 1930s–1940s. Dr. Nevezhin’s scholarly achievements can be traced on the basis of his published works from this period (see note 3).

Along with a large body of sources, the author has also thoroughly studied the relevant scholarly literature on the subject (collections of documents, monographs, and electronic publications), which is mentioned by the reviewer.

The chronological period chosen for the study (May 1939 — April 1941) is an extremely complex time, when Europe and the world were making efforts to prevent a major war, living in tense anticipation of its outbreak, or had already entered it, including the USSR (September 1939).

At the same time, both the author and the reviewer focus not so much on these dramatic events and processes — essentially, miscalculations in Stalin’s foreign policy — as on what he said during “table talks” at Kremlin receptions. Of course, the study of “*tamada (toastmaster) practices*”, as well as *verbal* and *non-verbal* approaches to directing the “foreign policy of the state”, can be regarded as an important new aspect in researching the chosen topic; however, one would like to see more extensive assessments and characteristics of major processes, rather than only everyday details. Nevertheless, it is precisely such a turn of the topic toward the area of “microhistory” that makes it possible to better penetrate the atmosphere of the internal life of the Soviet leadership (down to who sat where during festive receptions). In conditions of insufficient information and the closed nature of political life in the country, additional information of this kind makes it possible to better understand the nature of its governance, including in extraordinary, crisis-born situations.

The reviewer draws attention to the materials presented in the work (cipher telegrams from plenipotentiary missions abroad, TASS bulletins), which were important sources of information for shaping Stalin's foreign policy position and were reflected in his notes and articles for the central newspapers. Unfortunately, the review does not elaborate on the book author's thesis concerning deliberate omissions and fabrications related to the subject of the study.

Dr. Vartumyan also notes that Dr. Nevezhin's work devotes insufficient attention to issues of Soviet foreign intelligence, whose information constituted an important instrument in the formulation of the foreign policy course of the Soviet leadership.

Keywords:

Verbal Context; Non-verbal Context; Anonymous Publications by I.V. Stalin; Foreign Policy; Comparative Method; Stalin's era; and «Political Tamadology»

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The reviewed monograph was written by the Russian historian Vladimir A. Nevezhin, Chief Research Fellow at the Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, a specialist in the

national history of the Soviet period. The relevance of the topic addressed in V.A. Nevezhin's scholarly work is obvious from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The study is distinguished by its solid source base: materials from the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, the State Archive of the Russian Federation, the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, as well as Internet resources¹.

The source base also includes published ego-documents (memoirs, diaries of participants and eyewitnesses of events), as well as periodicals (newspaper and journal articles).

One can agree with V.A. Nevezhin's assertion concerning the relevance of the chosen problem: "It is necessary, first, to understand what was happening in the international arena during that dramatic and ambiguously interpreted period, and second, how exactly the Soviet leadership — more precisely, Stalin — reacted to the rapidly developing and changing foreign policy situation" (p. 4).

The author of the monograph succeeded in finding his own analytical perspective on the historical sources he employed. V.A. Nevezhin used the comparative method, applied according to a subject-thematic principle. He examined a complex of problems in contemporary national history, noting the differences in historiographical approaches to the issue of safeguarding the state interests of the country as they were understood by Stalin. To this end, V.A. Nevezhin

¹ СССР и союзники // Документы Архива МИД России о внешней политике и дипломатии ведущих держав антигитлеровской коалиции. URL: <https://agk.mid.ru>; Президентская библиотека им. Б.Н. Ельцина // «Вторая мировая война в архивных документах (комплекс оцифрованных архивных документов, кино- и фотоматериалов)». URL: <https://www.prilib.ru/collections/1298142?ysclid=mcsuq0kwp1146211569> www.prilib.ru/collections/1298142?ysclid=mcsuq0kwp1146211569.

analyzed numerous works (monographs, articles, dissertations) that included, to varying degrees of completeness, a critical review of recent domestic historiography².

Characterizing the entire body of historiography, the author concluded that “the process of J. Stalin’s direct participation in decision-making and in the implementation of practical measures to carry out relations with individual countries has been insufficiently fully studied and analyzed” (p. 9).

V.A. Nevezhin proposed examining the topic in an event-based framework within precise chronological limits (May 1939–April 1941). The lower chronological boundary of the study was marked by the appointment of Vyacheslav Molotov as People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR, replacing Maxim Litvinov. The upper chronological boundary of the reviewed monograph is defined by the appointment of Joseph Stalin as Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR.

V.A. Nevezhin demonstrated an innovative approach in defining the contexts of Stalin’s leadership of the state’s foreign policy, distinguishing between *verbal* and *non-verbal* contexts. The verbal context involved Stalin’s statements and remarks during negotiations with representatives of foreign states, at diplomatic receptions, and at lunches and dinners in the inner circle of his associates. It should be noted that Nevezhin had earlier elaborated his “verbal” perspective in monographs that became a landmark phenomenon in

² Сетов Р.А. Тектоника войны. 1939 год. М., 2019; Советская внешняя политика и дипломатия 1939–1941 гг. Нетривиальный взгляд на события. М., 2019; Мельтюхов М.И. Упущенный шанс И.В. Сталина. Схватка за Европу: 1939–1941. М., 2021; Чубарьян А.О. Канун трагедии: Сталин и международный кризис. Сентябрь 1938 г. — июнь 1941 г. Документы, факты, версии. М., 2022; Айрапетов О.Р. Внешняя политика Советской России и СССР в 1920–1939 годах и истоки Второй Мировой войны. М., 2020.

domestic historiography. In those works, the historian examined Stalin within the framework of a new scholarly direction that may be termed “political *tamada* (toastmaster) studies”.³

The non-verbal approach is characterized by the use of texts of Stalin’s articles for the newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, as well as his notes and resolutions on documents containing information about international events of 1939–1941 and the role of the USSR in them.

The structure of the monograph is balanced in nature, which allowed for the consistent realization of the author’s concept. The introduction, the first chapter, and the conclusion present the theoretical and methodological aspects of the study and characterize the sources of information available to the Soviet leader regarding international relations.

In the preface, V.A. Nevezhin rightly notes that “despite the critical intensity easily detectable in contemporary historiography when analyzing the events and phenomena of the Stalin era, including foreign policy in 1939–1941, the question of the existence of deliberate omissions and fabrications relating to this problem remains in the shadows” (p. 14).

Chapters 3 and 4 of the monograph contain an analysis of the sources of information available to the Soviet leader on international relations and the essence of the USSR’s state interests as understood by Stalin. These chapters present factual evidence intended to refute the silences/omissions and fabrications of Western media.

One of the tasks of the author was to identify the specifics of the formation of the foundations of Stalin’s foreign policy

³ Неvezhin V.A. Застолья Иосифа Сталина. Книга первая. Большие кремлевские приемы 1930-х–1940-х годов. М., 2019; он же. Застолья Иосифа Сталина. Книга вторая. Обеды и ужины в узком кругу («симпозионы»). М., 2019; он же. Застолья Иосифа Сталина. Книга третья. Большие кремлевские приемы 1939–1945 гг. М., 2020.

views and ideas through his study of the texts of incoming ciphered telegrams from Soviet plenipotentiaries (ambassadors) in foreign countries. The study attempts to clarify the place of ciphered telegrams as one of the main sources informing the leader about the nature and specifics of current events in the international arena. Turning to this rare historiographical source required painstaking work with archival materials. In our view, V.A. Nevezhin successfully coped with this complex research task, “fertilizing” the historiographical layer of history with unique information.

New methodological and research elements included the author's thorough examination of Stalin's anonymous publications on the current foreign policy of the USSR. The sources for their analysis were primarily editorials and notes written in whole or in part and intended for central periodicals – the newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia* (1939–1941). The historian also introduced into scholarly circulation materials reflecting Stalin's editorial revisions of such articles prepared by members of their editorial boards (p. 19).

Summarizing Chapter 2 of the monograph, the author stated: “...Stalin received diverse information about all the vicissitudes and major events occurring in the international arena in 1939–1941. Its sources for the Soviet leader were, first, books from his personal library; second, Stalin was constantly sent bulletins from TASS – the information agency that was one of the leading organs of Soviet foreign policy propaganda. Another source of information on international problems for him was the publications of the ‘Foreign Policy Library’, above all the fundamental work entitled *History of Diplomacy*” (p. 94).

As the main issue addressed in the reviewed monograph, the author evaluates how Stalin understood state interests in the conduct of foreign policy. V.A. Nevezhin drew well-founded conclusions about the degree of reliability of the sources he identified and carried out a careful and meticulous analytical

comparison of them based on various authorial interpretations of the problem under study.

Drawing on previously published and newly introduced historical sources, the monograph traces the main lines in the Soviet leader's understanding of the state interests of the USSR.

The conducted research will undoubtedly attract the attention of historians with its original assessments and source base, designed to provide a more objective understanding of the full complexity of shaping Stalin's foreign policy activity in the prewar period. V.A. Nevezhin's monograph gives scholars and teachers grounds to take a new look at the dramatic phenomena and events of prewar history.

Taking into account the undoubted merits of the monograph, it is possible to note (as recommendations for future work) certain omissions. V.A. Nevezhin devoted considerable attention to the results of the official visit of the head of the USSR government, Vyacheslav Molotov, to Berlin in November 1940. However, the historian did not present his own assessments of the instructions regarding the Soviet position on foreign policy issues that Stalin gave Molotov literally on the eve of his departure for the German capital.

The study by V.A. Nevezhin would have possessed even greater completeness if it had defined the place of Soviet foreign intelligence in the context of Stalin's conduct and defense of his own course in the international arena under the extremely difficult conditions of the outbreak of the Second World War. There is no doubt that the information received by Stalin through intelligence channels constituted one of his sources in this context.

However, these remarks do not diminish the undeniable significance of the work carried out by V.A. Nevezhin. The professional community is presented with an original scholarly study that has both theoretical and practical value and confirms the

high level of qualification and well-deserved reputation of one of the prominent national historians, whose publications have significantly enriched the “library” of original studies of the Soviet era.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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