

Book Review by Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr.

## TYRANNY AND UTOPIA

*Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar*, by Simon Sebag Montefiore.  
Alfred A. Knopf, 816 pages, \$30



*You're an impossible man. It's impossible to live with you!*

—Nadya Alliluyeva to her husband,  
Joseph Stalin

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE, A BRITISH journalist who has spent a quarter of his life wandering among the smoldering ruins of Soviet civilization, sets out to study the Soviet horrors in a new way. “My mission was to go beyond the traditional explanations of Stalin as ‘enigma,’ ‘madman’ or ‘Satanic genius,’ and that of his comrades as ‘men without biographies,’ dreary mustached sycophants....” He has written, instead, “a biography of his courtiers... a biography of Stalin himself through his relationships with his magnates.” Accordingly, the book, which “does not pretend to be a history of [Stalin’s] foreign and domestic policies,” is dense with personal matters: old friendships, wives and children, the hobbies of the leaders, their quarrels, reconciliations, and adulteries, their food and clothes—the stuff of *People* magazine. Stalin and his Politburo pals, like the Kennedys, loved throwing people into the pool. As the great Hyppolite Taine remarks of Macaulay, Montefiore “never forgets the actual.... The petty details which he...selects fix the attention, and place the scene before our eyes.... These precise details...give to history the animation and life of a novel.”

As part of a massive research effort, Montefiore has visited most of Stalin’s homes, including his five vacation houses in Georgia’s seceded and defiant Abkhaz province; he puts before us the settings for each historic conver-

sation or decision. He has used an incredibly wide range of sources—printed, archival, and living—though, like many post-Soviet writers, Montefiore seems largely ignorant of the rich tradition of Kremlinology. In a book chock full of sourced detail, the distance between footnotes often makes the source of a particular assertion difficult to identify, and sometimes assertions in the text seem to go beyond the evidence. One story, sourced to a Politburo child, differs from my own interview with the same subject. But Montefiore’s overall angle of attack—his focus on the personal, on “gossip,” on Stalin’s “courtiers”—is needed and very promising.

In any regime based on personal authority, the personality and idiosyncrasies of the ruler, and also of his lieutenants, must have a great determining voice in political outcomes. Stalin, for example, had the power, and the warrant from Bolshevik doctrine, to censor and edit literature and music. If Stalin’s “deeply conservative tastes remained nineteenth century even during the Modernist blossoming of the twenties,” this fact played a great role in exacerbating the intellectuals’ estrangement from the regime. With Stalin gone, Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization gave the intellectuals hope, but his taste doomed the reconciliation when he reacted against the avant-garde Manezh art show. When Gorbachev eventually liberated the intellectuals, by *glasnost*, to criticize the regime, their accumulated resentment was enough to destroy its public legitimacy.

The ruler of a vast country who is the founder of a new regime—and Stalin, not Lenin, was the founder of the Soviet system that foundered in the ‘80s—can only consummate his titanic

labors by the actions of his chieftains, who leave the imprint of their personalities on the institutions of the regime and on history.

Could we understand the United States built by Washington if we knew Hamilton and Jefferson only as anonymous tools? In the Soviet case, the terror would not have extended so far without the neurotic instability of the tiny, bisexual Yezhov, People’s Commissar of State Security, who “does not know how to stop.” Hitler might have won the war if Stalin had not turned over war industry and domestic affairs to the businesslike bourgeois Giorgi Malenkov and to Lavrenty Beria. Montefiore says less about the colorless Malenkov, but rightly calls Beria a “gifted, intelligent, ruthless and tirelessly competent adventurer.” He notes that Beria was “less devoted to Marxism as time went on,” but Beria’s daughter-in-law is probably more accurate in labeling him “never a real communist.” Beria himself mused, shortly before Stalin’s death, “The USSR can never succeed until we have private property.” When watching his favorite Westerns, Beria “identified with the Mexican bandits,” that is, with southern outsiders who can only get ahead by joining or plundering whatever side offers the best pickings. Without these personality traits and views, Beria would not have carried out his 1953 “bid for popularity by de-Bolshevizing the regime.”

AFTER WORLD WAR II, STALIN RETREATED from public view, making few public statements but continuing to issue detailed secret instructions on important matters of public policy such as the torture of “mur-



derers in white coats," the Jewish doctors. The most prominent pronouncements Stalin did make were oracular works of Marxist "theory," *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics and Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.* Like Mao before the Cultural Revolution, Stalin sought the status of a theocrat who does not deign to govern in merely tactical matters, but allows his high priests and Levites to argue over the practical application of his sacred laws. Thus one leader and his team of followers could be made the fall guy for failed or superseded policy. Zhdanov and his followers became the scapegoats, in the "Leningrad Case," for the failed attempt to communize Western Europe through the local Communist parties and to make the radical, and independent, Yugoslav Communists a favored partner. Beria was to be the scapegoat, at the end of Stalin's life, for the prominence of Jews and non-Russians in the party from the revolution until the end of World War II. Perhaps Stalin learned from the disastrous friendship with Hitler, ended by the German surprise attack, never to step forward in public as responsible for risky policy.

This pattern of rule had another clever aspect. Stalin normally allowed the ascendant faction to exterminate the leaders of the superseded group, which in turn provided charges on which the ascendant group could be brought low, leaving Stalin in the position of supreme arbiter. *Kompromat* (material for accusation or blackmail) remained enormously important throughout the brief life of the Soviet regime, from Lenin's testament questioning Stalin's fitness to lead to Gorbachev's *glasnost*. Montefiore perceives that "the system encouraged Terror entrepreneurialism," but does not tease out these deeper techniques of Stalin's rule to the extent that Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov did in *Stalin's Last Crime* (2003). In turning the focus away from policy, he fails to note how distinctive were the policy repertoires advocated by different "magnates." But if Montefiore had included more policy in his mix, it would only have strengthened the argument for his new focus on Stalin's "magnates."

Montefiore's approach leads him to question the convention by which most biographers of Stalin, Hitler, and their lieutenants have presented their actions as absurd or stupid, because the men themselves were evil. We like to think that they desolated the center of world civilization without any particular merits or talents. This view seems somehow instinctive. Perhaps it wells up from some primeval feeling of the oneness of what were once called virtues, and their rootedness, confirmed by thousands of years of moral teachings, in human strength or wholeness. But this instinct blocks inquiry into why the wicked titans of history did specif-

ic things, how they could achieve so much, and ultimately into why they were so evil.

**A**S THE SON OF A DRUNKEN, IMPROVIDENT shoemaker, without education, connections, or even being a Russian, Stalin eliminated more-favored rivals one by one, until he ended up in the seat of the glittering heirs of the Caesars. Before his throne was stable, he embarked on a campaign to tame and regiment most of those he ruled. No sooner had he broken the peasants than he faced the frenzied, annihilating onslaught of the country that had brought European civilization to its modern peak and perfection, Germany. And, at the head of the society and regime he had personally crafted in 15 years of hectic demolition and reconstruction, he somehow won the unequal contest. The Anglo-Saxons' contribution was modest. For the first time in modern total war, the more backward society prevailed against the more advanced. By valor, by discipline, by inventiveness, by sheer will, Stalin's Soviet Union emerged in unrivalled dominion of the European continent, and immediately challenged the island powers—as advanced in technology, but far wealthier than Germany—for global hegemony, an unequal fight sustained for 45 years. To do these things Stalin must have been a great man.

Montefiore does not say so in so many words, but his portrait represents a substantial reevaluation of Stalin: a reevaluation upwards.

Far from being the colourless bureaucratic mediocrity disdained by Trotsky, the real Stalin was an energetic and vainglorious melodramatist who was exceptional in every way.... The man inside was a super-intelligent and gifted politician for whom his own historic role was paramount, a nervy intellectual who manically read history and literature, and a fidgety hypochondriac.... While incapable of true empathy on the one hand, he was a master of friendships on the other.... When he set his mind on charming a man, he was irresistible.

Montefiore rightly identifies Stalin's "dry wit." Stalin "was an intellectual, despite being the son of a cobbler and a washerwoman. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that Stalin was the best-read ruler of Russia from Catherine the Great up to Vladimir Putin." In breadth of knowledge, indeed, he compared well with most world leaders of modern times:

Before he set off for [vacation] he scrawled to Poskrebyshv [his secretary]: "Order all these books. Stalin. *Goethe's Letters*,

*Poetry of the French Revolution*, Pushkin, Konstantin Simonov, Shakespeare, Herzen, *History of the Seven Years War*—and *Battle at Sea 1939-1945* by Peter Scott."

Beach towel reading! In writing, Stalin had "the ability to reduce complex problems to lucid simplicity."

Montefiore's presentation of Stalin differs from earlier ones in two particular ways. First, we do not see an austere, but a sexually indulgent Stalin amid a debauched and drunken Bolshevik elite. Not only Beria, but Kalinin, Kirov, Kuibyshev, Vlasik, Voroshilov, Yagoda, Yenukidze, and Yezhov could be described as tireless womanizers, while Lenin and many others took advantage of their secretaries or other women. Yezhov's wife was a manic seducer of writers, most of whom were doomed by her whimsies. This picture calls into question the contrast between ancient tyranny and modern ideological tyranny that seems otherwise plausible.

Second, in contrast to most writers on Stalin, Montefiore emphasizes his Georgian qualities.

...His personal Russianness has been exaggerated. His lifestyle and mentality remained Georgian. He talked Georgian, ate Georgian, personally ruled Georgia..., becoming involved in parochial politics, missed his childhood friends, and spent almost half of his last eight years in his own isolated, fantasy Georgia.

I am more persuaded by Robert Conquest, who argues, in *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* (1991), that "His temperament was, by all usual standards, very unGeorgian," except for the mountaineer's "readiness for revenge." Stalin rarely saw his mother, even when vacationing in Georgia: most un-Georgian. His own children got the impression "he used to be a Georgian." He forbade speaking Georgian in the presence of Russians, and began to replace "proletarian internationalism" by Russian nationalism from the early '30s, as soon as he was dictator. One can see in this a clever adaptation to his role as the ruler of the former Russian empire, but it is probably more the trait called by psychoanalysts "identification with the adversary." Stalin preferred to identify with Russia, powerful and triumphant, rather than with passive and downtrodden Georgia. Any such impulses must have been powerfully encouraged by Marxism-Leninism's insistence that everything is a matter of power, and by its contempt for weakness and failure. Ultimately, we should see Stalin, like other members of small, dependent peoples, as responding to his sense of marginality by seeking significance in universal ideas, the ideas of Marx and Lenin.

MONTEFIORE'S RECOGNITION OF Stalin's merits certainly does not block his acknowledgment of Stalin's evil character. Suspicion and fear, which Montefiore calls "paranoia," dominated Stalin's life. To some extent, Montefiore argues, his paranoia was understandable in the light of his circumstances.

His paranoia was part of a personal vicious circle that was to prove so deadly for many who knew him, yet it was understandable. His radical policies led to excessive repressions that led to the opposition he most feared....

This argument is quite persuasive. I believe, however, that Montefiore does not see a more modest, but significant, contributing factor: the inevitable fragility of illegitimate personal rule. Nominally Stalin was selected as General Secretary by the Central Committee, elected in turn by the Party Congress elected freely by millions of Communists. Actually, of course, it was precisely the other way around: Stalin chose his Politburo and Central Committee, which in turn chose the delegates to the infrequent Congresses, and so forth. Because the real mode of power contradicted the formal institutions, the power gained was always under threat, and it could only be defended by informal, out-of-sight means. For Stalin, these methods came to include intimidation, blackmail, and murder. Khrushchev discarded these means, and was removed, in 1964, by a conspiracy of the "magnates" below him. Gorbachev suffered something similar.

Because Montefiore is not writing a history of Stalin's foreign and domestic policies, the reader of his fascinating book is not able to trace the operation of power in the Soviet system and Stalin's reactions to it. He cites the politically crucial September 25, 1936, telegram of Stalin to Zhdanov that touched off the terror against the party elite, but omits the critical words, "The GPU [security police] is lagging four years behind in this." Four years earlier brings us back to August 21, 1932, amid the famines of collectivization, when Martemyan Riutin prepared a platform demanding Stalin's removal from office and circulated it within the party. At that time Stalin apparently demanded Riutin's execution, a demand contrary to the existing convention that members of the party elite not be executed, and therefore resisted by the "magnates" around Stalin. As Montefiore often emphasizes, the failure to secure a political proposal was as personally important to Stalin and his magnates as a love affair or a suicide. But in the end, the author's concentration on the wonderful personal details crowds

out the political. A book cannot do everything, but this is the greatest defect of Montefiore's absorbing work. It is a defect that makes it hard to ground properly any interpretation of Stalin's "paranoia" and cruelty.

Still, Montefiore does full justice to Stalin's "heartless cruelty," displayed at every level from the murder of millions to his enjoyment at deftly placing tomatoes on chairs to ruin Mikoyan's beautiful suits at Politburo dinners. Occasionally Stalin would forgive someone, admitting in an ordinary tone, "We tortured you too much." On one level, Montefiore admits that Stalin knew many victims were innocent. His way of understanding this is to argue:

Did Stalin really believe it all? Yes, passionately, because it was politically necessary, which was better than mere truth. 'We ourselves will be able to determine,' Stalin told Ignatiev [his last security minister], 'what is true and what is not.'

Here, I believe, Montefiore comes close to understanding the full problem of a regime based on the public sovereignty of the philosophic truth, which "scientific socialism" claimed to be. Any government is forced to make numerous merely tactical decisions. If, *a priori*, that government's decisions flow from its scientific knowledge, every tactical necessity is invested with the apodictic character of Truth. The regime based on the truth converts itself in practice into one based on the most systematic falsehood.

Another contributing factor was, in my opinion, Stalin's lower-class origin, one step removed from the peasantry. It is no longer fashionable to say it, but people who lead the tough life of the poor tend to be tough and callous toward others. Across many societies, for example, peasants are cruel to animals—except their own. Peasant coarseness may have set Stalin on the road of indifference to the suffering of millions, just as it predisposed him to crude obscenities and contempt for women.

Without any doubt, however, Montefiore is right to see in Bolshevik ideology the major determinant of Stalin's cruelty. Throughout his life, according to Montefiore, Stalin "remained a fanatical Marxist." Marxism was a comprehensive, pseudo-philosophic explanation of the world and offered a religious salvation to mankind. Montefiore rightly notes that most Bolsheviks came from religious backgrounds, a connection true of many 19th-century Russian radicals before them. But the place of religion had been filled, for them, with the icy grandeur of materialist science.

Stalin lectured Bukharin that the "the personal element... is not worth a brass

farthing"... They cultivated their coldness. "A Bolshevik should love his work more than his wife," said Kirov.

Kirov, accordingly, had not seen his sisters for 20 years when he was killed. With such an attitude toward their nearest and dearest, it was easy to snuff out any compassion toward those defined as opponents. These Bolshevik attitudes were exacerbated by the pitiless, chaotic civil war that inaugurated their rule.

It was here that Stalin grasped the convenience of death as the simplest and most effective political tool.... [D]uring the Civil War the Bolsheviks, clad in leather boots, coats and holsters, embraced a cult of the glamour of violence that Stalin made his own.

That Bolshevik taste for the absolute—for Utopia and violence—seems far distant now in the West that gave it birth. But it has reappeared within the Islamic world. The re-creation of a universal Caliphate, which ceased to rule all Muslim lands about the year 800, has become a widespread demand of radical Islamic groups from Morocco to Central Asia—a demand as abstract and utopian as Communism itself. In pursuit of such aims a cult of death as pitiless as Stalin's has gained widespread ascendancy over radical Muslims. The war against this style of tyranny demands the same energies, and meets with the same Western equivocations, as the war against Stalinism.

AMONG US, UTOPIAN SOLUTIONS ARE no longer advocated as part of a comprehensive political program. Ideology has become more elusive, but perhaps therefore more insidious. Is not a demand like homosexual marriage as comprehensive and drastic a reordering of human practices as elements of the Bolshevik program? Certainly it is pressed with the same sincere conviction of its moral urgency. With equal urgency American science is dazzled by the prospect of improving men as they are, with all their undeserved deformities and heart-rending sufferings, by genetic measures. To make such changes is now within our grasp, but the eventual objective is far from clear. Perhaps it is useful to brood once more upon the rage emptied on the world by Stalin and his magnates. They, too, had the very best of intentions.

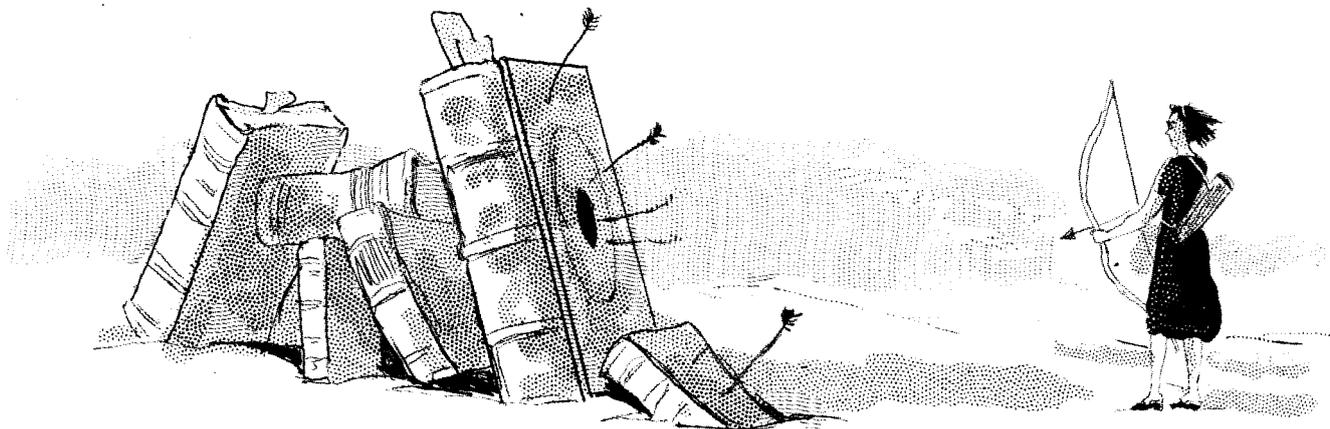
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Book Review by Clifford Orwin

## THE STRAUSSIANS ARE COMING!

*Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, by Anne Norton.  
Yale University Press, 256 pages, \$25



**T**OO OFTEN, BETWEEN SO-CALLED Straussians and other scholars there prevails only a dialogue of the deaf. Although Anne Norton might seem qualified to ameliorate this situation, unfortunately she has not done so here. And her intention is too obviously poisonous to merit a friendly reply.

Norton's strategy for attacking Straussians isn't new; it was pioneered by European journalists. Here's how it works. Rather than take on Leo Strauss (bigger game than you can handle!), pay him some measure of lip service. You may even distinguish between his "students" (few and good) and his "disciples" (many and bad). Having thus established your fair-mindedness, you blast the "disciples" (the Straussians) for not living up to the standards of the Master.

Norton, a professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, brings little that is novel to this strategy, except for a personal twist. As it happens, she actually spent her formative years at the University of Chicago studying with Straussian teachers, hobnobbing with Straussian students, and (last but not least) being *trusted* by Straussians. Odd that in her litany of Straussian errors Norton never comments on this one.

Not that she ever actually *was* a Straussian; no, this is a kiss-and-tell book by someone who won't admit to having kissed. She never sought the confidences of Straussians; apparently her insatiable appetite for learning led them to confide in her against her will. Even so, her book resembles those anti-Catholic tracts so popular in 19th-century America, e.g., *Strange Confessions of Maria Monk*, or *Thirty Years in a Convent*. Norton too has escaped to tell her lurid tale.

Although the book is devoid of humor or iro-

ny, it is comically self-important. Norton leans hard on the war on terror, which by the end of the book will stand revealed as a Straussian plot. And she has an obligation to explain it all to us (however painful the task for her), because she was a witness to history, and her memories must not be allowed to fade into blackness. (Shades of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel.)

Norton even whacks us with the Socratic injunction "Know thyself." But has she followed it herself? Does she even grasp her real motives in writing this book? She assures us repeatedly that they were the highest, but if there was just one little thing that she might have learned from her studies with students of Strauss, it's that nothing is so dangerous as the conviction of one's own high-mindedness.

Early in the book, Norton cites Strauss himself that in democracy every intellectual movement owes an accounting of itself to the public. Fair enough. But what has that to do with her? She's not a Straussian; her book offers not self-disclosure but merely the trashing of an enemy. Criticism earns moral credit especially when it's self-criticism, and of that this book contains not a glimmer.

Norton seems unaware that this typical exercise in academic self-promotion reads just like one. Only our Anne always got it right; only she grasps the big picture. Only she can lecture non-Straussians for maligning Strauss (the better, of course, to confirm them in their fear and loathing of Straussians) while lecturing Straussians for having remained in tutelage to him. Mostly, though, she praises herself for her role in bringing Social Justice to the University after its dark night of Exclusiveness.

She really warms to this last theme. She is

delighted to be the cheerleader for her generation and the new world of diversity that it claims to have brought us. Perhaps I didn't put that quite right. Cheerleaders are perky; Norton is unrelentingly preachy.

**T**HE STRUCTURE OF LEO STRAUSS AND *the Politics of American Empire* is fairly simple: Norton proceeds from one Straussian transgression to the next. After the expected frisson of indignation has subsided, she reels us back in to the academically approved opinion. This is a perfectly sensible format for a book that speaks to the already persuaded.

Yet despite this colorful riot of Straussian malfeasance one can't help feeling that the book is mostly composed of filler. Apparently Norton is confident that we just can't get enough of her wisdom, because she lectures us on absolutely everything, from the role of the mass media to the unpleasantness of postmodern warfare to the moral perils of America's relationship with Israel. In fact, this fierce enemy of dogmatism proves to have fixed opinions on everything under the sun.

The second half of the book is devoted mostly to the left-liberal boilerplate critique of neoconservatism. (Cursed be those who would drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge! Horrors that anyone should have contemplated the tactical use of nuclear weapons!) I'll give Norton this much credit: she's every bit as indignant as if she were the first to denounce these enormities. She musters similar talking-points passion against the Bush Administration's foreign policy. There's no point in either recounting her critique or in responding to it, inasmuch as we've all rehearsed these points so many times by now.