Tim Flannery Little creatures of Flores island  Sarah Curtis Writing for the boss James M. Murphy The 9/11 library Learned journals: Music, media, history

James Campbell Love, Truman Capote

Mark Wormald V. S. Pritchett, valet

Kate Cooper Fornication ethics
A parcel from their old friend

STEPHEN KOTKIN

Zhores A. Medvedev and Roy A. Medvedev

THE UNKNOWN STALIN
Translated by Ellen Dahrendorf
320pp. Touria £19.95.
I 86064 768 5
US: Woodstock: Overlook $29.95. I 585 67502 4

Donald Rayfield

STALIN AND HIS HANGMEN
An authoritative portrait of a tyrant and those who served him
528pp. Viking. £20.
0 670 91088 0
US: Random House. $29.95. 0 375 50632 2

Writings on Stalin have come to resemble heavy industry in the defunct Soviet Union – they pour out in high volume and low quality, self-styled as breakthroughs for humanity. Recent output ranges from Roman Brackman, who speculates that Stalin contracted with an axe murderer to kill his father in 1906 and that the deaths of millions followed from petty personal revenge, to Simon Sebag Montefiore’s peepage of panty collectors who gathered chez Stalin for drunken buffoonery and incestuous liaisons, as if at Cambridge on family money. The Unknown Stalin, a patchy assemblage of essays, individually and jointly written over more than a decade by the accomplished Medvedev brothers and issued in Russian in 2001, aims to be conceptually revisionist without sensationalism.

Stalin is about as unknown as, say, Hitler. But Zhores A. and Roy A. Medvedev contend that he was a thinking, calculating, hard-working man possessed of an iron will and considerable intellect; undoubtedly he was a patriot concerned to uphold historic Russian statehood. This is the ‘unknown’ Stalin who is the subject of our book”. They acknowledge that this is also the Stalin of Dmitri Volkogonov, whose Triumph and Tragedy (1996) remains one of the few exceptional new works, distinguished by its focus not on the purges but on the still vaster war with the Nazis. The Medvedevs, too, seek to understand the supposed statelessness as well as the slaughter.

Among their achievements is to place in perspective the new documentation that has, and has not, come to light. A joint essay in the book on Stalin’s personal archive concludes that it was largely destroyed by his complicit heirs (a discovery made in 1988 by Volkogonov, and confirmed by the censorious Stalin biographer Edward Ratzinsky). Thus, we have no original drafts of the dictator’s writings, only a fraction of his annotated 20,000-volume library, and none of the small notebooks he kept, let alone the files that were presumed to be in his safe. We do have Stalin’s appointment book – but just for his Kremlin office, not for the dacha – and we lack his phone logs. In addition, the registry of the documents that flowed to and from Stalin is “nowhere to be found”, while photographs from his family albums somehow found their way into private collections abroad. But another essay, by Zhores Medvedev, on the rumours surrounding Stalin’s death, brilliantly itemizes his multiple ailments and the attempted cures, such as the long rests he took most years in the south, whence the dictator issued conspiratorial missives to minions back in Moscow – the closest approximation we have to table talk.

The authors’ excursions into history and personalities. Was Stalin murdered? Did he prepare for his aftermath? On such questions the volume manages to be both shrewd and contradictory. Zhores deftly sifts the evidence of Stalin’s daily diary with memoirs to conclude that no one needed to poise Stalin – he essentially did so himself, for the chronically ill septuagenarian would not tolerate a doctor or nurse among his staff, and none was clandestinely assigned to him in the absence of the medical director. Another essay, also by Zhores, deduces that Stalin had a secret heir – Mikhail Suslov, who, though readily eclipsed in the succession struggle, emerged as one of the Kremlin power-brokers under both Khrushchev and Brezhnev. And yet Roy writes in a different essay that Stalin designated no heir and changed favourites frequently, adding that Suslov would never have been accepted by the other post-Stalin pygmies.

Science occupies a central place in the collection. Roy’s essay on Stalin and the bomb follows well short of David Holloway’s book-length account (1994) and appears aimed at countering prevalent misconceptions among Russians – something characteristic of the volume as a whole. For example, wrestling with the question of who deserves credit for the Soviet bomb – Soviet scientists, Soviet intelligencia, foreign spies, the forced labourers exposed to radiation – Zhores writes, “it was the existence of this unique, enormous reserve of totally mobile and often highly skilled workers – essentially slave labour – that was crucial to the success of the whole project. Does this justify the existence of the Gulag? Certainly not!”. To a non-Russian audience, that very question is in itself startling.

But it is worth reading on. Stalin infamously backed the crackpot Lysenko, but he also tripled the budget for science. Zhores explains that even as Stalin supported the Lamarckianism that promised great leaps for Soviet agriculture via the manipulation of plants (Stalin’s single hobby, by the way), he named Lysenko, removing the biologist’s allusions to a dichotomy between Western and Soviet science. Whereas Lysenko wrote “any science is based on class”, Stalin commented on the manuscript, “Ha, ha, ha! Mathematics? And Darwin?”

The quality of the Medvedevs’ essays is, however, uneven. A mostly unfootnoted account of Stalin and the Blitzkrieg – drawing on the inferior 1990 edition of Zhukov’s memoirs, thereby dating the essay, which is also innocent of German- and English-language historiography – argues one-sidedly that Stalin did not ignore the warnings of war and did not blunder in keeping so many forces on the border to “blueprint a German advance. To this, Stalin’s amateurism, Roy Medvedev contributes his well-worn promotion of the Bukharin melodrama (“Mikoyan, whom I met several times in 1962–63, told me that Bukharin was never tortured”, and so on) and of Lenin’s supposed priority to the weapons policy. The argument of the book, that Stalin was a calculating leader, gets lost. “To this day the motivation behind so much of Stalin’s behaviour remains a riddle”, Roy concludes. “He often took decisions without arguments or reasons.”

Donald Rayfield, author of a major study of Georgians belles-lettres, has now sketched a composite of five Soviet secret police chiefs, another entry in the proliferating genre, “all Stalin’s (bang)ments” (which the Medvedevs eschew). Rayfield’s narrative encompasses Dzierzyński, Mhenzinsky, Yagoda, Yezev and Beria, with cameos for characters such as Karl Pauker, a former hairdresser and make-up artist from the Lemberg ghetto, with Stalin’s daily diary and an intermittent analysis, too, can be colourful. “Historians have to learn from zoology”, Rayfield instructs: “nothing is more violent than a large group of chimpanzees or baboons when short of food or territory under the leadership of an alpha male”. Meanwhile, Beria, the notorious child rapist, “was not beyond the pale”, the author asserts, given the standards of Soviet officials, “or even compared to J. F. Kennedy or David Lloyd George.”

The best chapter of Stalin and His Hangmen is its first, on the tyrant himself, a tour de force of Stalin’s Georgian roots indicating – against the entire literature – that he had a happy childhood. Cousins who knew him back then survived, and were able to keep in touch until his death. “They were the only human beings with whom Stalin sustained a semblance of normal relations”, Rayfield observes. “In his old age he would send them and some schoolmates parcels of cash.”

Other winning moments include the 1939 quotation from, of all places, The Godless, an official Soviet periodical – which Rayfield spotted in Evgeny Gromov’s indispensable, untranslated Stalin: Power and art (1998) – confessing that “in his first years of study [Stalin] was very much a believer, going to all the services, singing in the church choir”.

Rayfield’s persuasive young lobe (in the Georgian) also devoured books, dabbled in modern languages and in Greek, and acquired some colloquial Armenian, before getting mixed up with criminals and Marxists and going on to rule a sixth of the earth. A neglectful son, Stalin did once try to explain to his mother who he had become. “Mama, do you remember our tsar?”, he wrote in a brief letter. “Well, I’m something like the tsar.”

Except that the tsar had a fairly undemocrized autocracy. Stalin commanded a staggeringly massive new state, with tanks and telephones, submarines and cinemas, and equally important, a new Soviet society and the loyalty of millions – not just secret policemen. These wider considerations are still absent from the new Stalin biographies, none of which has supplanted Boris Souvarine’s early masterpiece, Stalin: Aperçu historique du bolchevisme (1935).