

Koba the dread

Martin Amis

Oct 5 - Oct 7 2003

Why do we laugh about Stalin and the vicissitudes of the Soviet system, and not about Hitler and the crimes of Nazism? Why do we treat with such indulgence advocates and apologists of the Communist system, counting many of them as our most trusted and respected friends, while the merest indication of sympathy, however incidental, of the former Nazi regime, inspires our horror and contempt and leads to immediate ostracism?

Amis recalls with a certain embarrassment the case of his father - the novelist Kingsley Amis, who became a Communist in the 30's, as was at the time fashionable in academic circles, especially at Cambridge, and who remained one for fifteen years, before becoming a right-winger supporting among other things the American venture in Vietnam. Amis as a child of the 50's and a youth of the 60's naturally identified with the chic radicalism of his generation, without actually committing himself. The oppositional glorification of the Soviet regime, renewed at the end of the War, fortified by the Cold War, slowly dissipated over the ensuing decades. The expulsion of Solshenitsyn and the revelations of the death-camps of Stalin caused a momentary stir and seeded a few doubts, but it was the ossification of the system, its inexorable decline, the extent of which was kept a secret for long, or dismissed as right-wing propaganda, that led to the eventual implosion in the early 90's, which did it in. Communism, Soviet-style, ended not with a bang, but with a whimper, and interest faded away more or less completely afterwards.

So why did Amis decide to write such a book? The excesses of the Stalinist terror are there for all to be seen in all their gruesome details in the monumental works of Solshenitsyn, and as the archives are opening up in the former Soviet Union, the revelations of Solshenitsyn can not only be confirmed but also elaborated upon, adding more and more documentary detail to a horror, whose scope far exceeds initial estimates. Twenty years after Solshenitsyn, whose Messianic pronouncements in the meantime tarnished his reputation and finally marginalized it, a spate of thick books indicting the Stalinist regime appeared, one of them incidentally written by a friend of Amis father. So what can Amis add to all this? The available literature is in many ways forbidding. The appearance of the first volume of *Gulag Arkipelag* resulted in many readers, or at least buyers, but for most readers the tales were too much of a 'good' thing, and with subsequent volumes the sales plummeted, although, according to Amis, the book just kept on getting better and better. Thus there is certainly a need for a more accessible account, a thumb-nail introduction to Stalinism (or to be honest the whole Soviet period launched by driven maniacs like Lenin and Trotsky) so to speak. Amis chooses to frame his presentation with autobiographical snippets, the climax of which consist in a rather sentimental lamentation upon the untimely death (at forty-six) of his little sister, which in the general context of mass-murder seems rather tasteless. When it comes to his actual presentation, he refers only to well-known secondary sources, to which the serious reader would be well-advised to turn, and adds consequently nothing factually new; but also, which is far more damning,

no new viewpoint. There is a logical question provoked by the material, and which he is unable to dodge, but (wisely?) evades to answer. Namely, whether Stalinism was worse than Nazism. Amis lamely confesses no, he just feels so, and confesses to be unable to provide a rational argument. Such an evasion is obviously natural, but one cannot entirely free oneself from the suspicion that his hesitancy to say yes, stems less from reasoned reflexion, than a fear of painting himself into a socially unacceptable corner. The question may be logical, yet it is ultimately specious, because any answer to which was worse, will inevitably imply which was better, and thus implicitly condone atrocities by reference to even worse ones. One may clearly argue that in a way Stalinism caused a larger quantitative amount of suffering, but the reason is not to be sought in the restraint of Hitler, but in the opportunities of Stalin, who could exercise his malevolence under a longer time-period and aided by the contingencies of geographical advantage (i.e. vast territories ruled by Arctic Cold). Bolshevism caused deep and fundamental damage to the Russian Nation, damage which may take generations to overcome: while the damage done to Germany as a Nation seems to have been marginal. Such a statement is clearly somewhat cynical, taken into account the death-tolls and the material ravages of war, yet civilized institutions seems to have survived more or less intact, and the hardships Germany and the Germans suffered, appears to have been of a mere transient nature. (One does of course in this analysis ignore the fate of the Jews, but from the point of Society as such, it apparently can be ignored.) It is also highly relevant to point out that Germany, unlike Japan and the former Sovietunion, has clearly confronted itself with its recent past. Although past atrocities can never be undone, squarely facing them is a necessary measure for being able to move on. And the Germans are indeed deeply ashamed of their recent role in history, ashamed to the point of self-pity, as the enthusiastic response to Goldhagens testimony of willing executioners, testify.

One should in principle never criticise an author for not writing another kind of book, but that does not mean that it is not sometimes tempting. There are many interesting questions to ask. Why was Stalin loved in spite of the terror he unleashed. Does that not that very love belie the tale of indiscriminate terror? Does it not just show that after all Stalin was only crushing a few eggs (never mind a few million) in order to make a wonderful omelette? (The standard apology for the Soviet experiment.) Amis attributes his popularity to manipulation, but that begs the question of why people are so easily manipulated. And how come that the Soviet Army could muster such a spirited defence against a German onslaught, resulting in crushing it eventually, when the country was so ravaged by terror? How come an inefficient planned economy was so effective in producing arms during the chaos of war? Amis clearly adheres to the theory that the Germans over-extended themselves from the start, that the logistics of the campaign became too formidable, and the vast geography of Russia formed a marsh into which the effort dissipated. He points out that had not Stalin crippled his army by paranoid purges, the Germans would never have been allowed their initial triumphs but been contained at an early stage. Of such things we can only speculate, more interesting is the rallying to the sacred soil of the Mother Country, drawing on old traditions, involving the Russian Orthodox Church, making an irrelevance, be it temporary, of the Communist ideology.

Stalin and Hitler stand out in the history of the 20th century, and their status as unique

personalities cannot be doubted, thus they are assured of a lasting infamy, which in the long perspective of history, is more or less indistinguishable from fame. Hence, ironically, their desperate quests for long-term visibility have been gratified, if not posthumously enjoyed. One tends therefore to endow their personalities with a specious grandness, given the scopes of the mayhem they projected. However, history is not only one damned thing after another, but a sorry cavalcade of petty tyrants and the atrocious suffering left in their wake; and there is no reason to assume that either Stalin or Hitler constitute a huge negative advance, only that fate supplied them with a context allowing their phantasies a far wider scope than was the privilege of their predecessors. In this there clearly is a lesson for us, and the analysis of such a lesson is in fact the most pressing problem going beyond the mere documentation of horrors, which in retrospect runs the risks of being reduced to dark tales merely titillating our fascination with the horrible.

So why are we merely laughing at the excesses of the Soviet period, taking them as manifestations of a cruel fate, beyond the reach of mankind, and only approached with the detachment of humor. Why do we indeed treat the effusions on Stalin by a Shaw as merely excentric, while the pro-fascist proponents of a Pound earned him a lifelong sentence as a madman? Amis does not give the answers, he does not even start to. Maybe answers can be given, but only in a distant future, when their interests may have long faded away.

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