

Stalin

The court of the red tsar

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Power fascinates as well as corrupts, and absolute power, fascinates absolutely. Thus Stalin, like Hitler, has been a magnate to biographers. Montefiori is yet another one of those in that long line, telling the same story, with minor variations, over and over again. Minor variations? Everything depends so much on your point of view. You could be a hagiographer, or a critical debunker, or try to be clever and stir the middle way. In the case of Stalin, unlike the case of Hitler, you are able to choose from an abundance of either category of approaches. Stalin and Hitler are often compared. Who was worst, (with the tacit implication of who was most humane after all), is constantly being asked. A rather sterile question, what matters is that a person like Stalin should be viewed by the same criteria as Hitler.

Montefiori a young enthusiastic Russophile, travelling the disintegrating Russia in the 90's, has gotten access to new undisclosed documents relating to the life of Stalin, (and of such I believe there are plenty to go around); as well as interviewing some obscure eye-witnesses in their twilight years (with the important witnesses being long since gone, their memoirs will have to serve as testimonies). The Stalinist period lies relatively close in time, as I grew up in the fifties and sixties, many of their main players were still around, some of them active, only moderately aged. A few peripheral ones have even remained until this very day, so there is no dearth of documentation.

The purpose of Montefioris book is to present the point of view of the proverbial fly on the wall. To be present in the inner recesses of power, without being noticed, is what many phantasize about, and this could explain the large popular success the book has enjoyed. It is a book concentrated on anecdote and gossip, focusing on personalities and personal relations and seldom if ever addressing the major questions. It is not meant to be a book of history as much as a family album.

To make for an intermittently lively narrative, direct speech is often employed, as well as having it embellished by touches like slamming down the receiver, or frowning with bloodshot eyes, all part of a most despicable, if seductive, journalistic device¹. The book starts out with the suicide of Stalins second wife. This surely is meant to throw the reader immediately into the proper setting, that of the charmed circle camping out in the Kremlin. Yet as a story of suspense, as it is surely meant to be, it fails. (Later on in the book the

¹ On challenged as to the boundary of fiction and fact in his work at a public performance in Stockholm On Nov 17, 2005, the author claimed, a bit too glibly in my view, that there was no fiction, just facts. And triumphantly he claimed that even the dialogue presented in his book was actually to be found in the available documentation, carefully written down, presumably transcribed from shorthand. This might have been true in a few cases, but consistently one cannot but doubt it.

author will be more successful with his dramatizations.) The prose is too riddled with clichés. What does the reader learn from reading that Stalin was a thin-skinned neurotic, or that he and his wife Nadya were too much alike for the marriage to be successful? (In what significant ways were they alike?) Or that they loved each other in their own fashion, what couples do not? Furthermore the reader is treated to the spectacle of the almost Oriental eyes of Stalin. Feline, and honey-colored, yet flashing a lupine yellow when in anger. The steady piling up of inanities upon each other tends to be tedious. Yet once in a while something flashes by. People who once had met Stalin were eager to meet him again, because they felt that a special bond had been established between them. This is not documented, but it has the ring of truth to it, and as a statement it is intriguing, pointing to one of the mysteries this book is ostensibly set out to solve, namely how one man could exercise such power among his entourage². True, power is charming by itself, as well as acting as a powerful aphrodisiac, yet this begs the question. A man striving and gaining power needs to have a charm that goes beyond what naturally comes with it. Hitler was also charming, but this is a fact that tends to be downplayed (as noted before, both characters need to be judged on the same terms); and in fact he possessed a charm, that unlike Stalins, also worked as a public speaker.

The first part of the book, covering the early thirties, fails because the perspective is so limited. During that time horrendous famines ravaged the Ukraine, and Stalin have his cohorts sent out to inspect and exhort. But due to the lack of a historical perspective, it all hangs in the air, and the actions and reactions of the cast simply make little if any sense. The historical setting is of course the brutal industrialization of the country, coupled with a forced collectivization. This brought great sufferings on millions of people and the reader is left with no comprehension of the situation. A few explanations spring to the mind. First there is the ideological war against the Kulak, the wealthy peasant and hence an enemy of the people; but waged with a viciousness that seems to extend indiscriminantly to the simple peasant as well. Ostensibly the purpose being to extract as much food as possible in order to feed the workers of industrialization, as well as to give vent to ideological hatred and revenge³. This being the first, but not the least, of the grand atrocities to be unleashed by the Bolshevik regime. How should they be judged? The starvations of millions could as well be the result of incompetence and bungled initiatives as opposed to deliberate malice, although such disasters always are accompanied by chilling cynicism. One naturally looks for precedents. Famines are in many ways natural consequences of subsistence economies with undeveloped means of transport, and as such they have been recurrent events all through history. The author provides no definite clues as how to interpret those famines, but it surely would be cynically naive to attribute those deaths purely to periodic historic forces, no doubt they were partly provoked and partly exploited by a ruthless leadership⁴.

² A Russian colleague of mine reported that he had watched some footage of Stalin. He had been struck by the fact that Stalins facial expression was neutral except for a very intense gaze.

³ According to the author, Gorky, apparently lauded the killing of the peasants as if out of a deep personal resentment.

⁴ One may compare those to the famines in Bengal on the eve of Indian dependance, claiming millions of victims, supposedly masterminded by the British. Not in order to excuse but to understand and put in perspective.

Thus one should be careful to directly compare them to extermination camps, although for most of the victims, the difference might have been moot. Stalin and his entourage were nevertheless very enthusiastic about the murderous proceedings, after all, who could be in the way of the inexorable march of history? The world of the private man and that of the public sphere are quite distinct, although as in the case of the infamous mind-body duality, there are very direct links between them, as personal decisions invariably translate into irrevocable actions with momenteous consequences. The serial murderer is the most despised and feared of all human beings, but only so far as he is acting singly and with no further goals than that of his own satisfaction; however, set him in a social context, provide him with some sort of ideology or purpose, and detach him from the dirty work, and he can with impunity kill not in the dozens but in the millions. Abstract issues enable the most fastidious to effect the termination of untold masses, this is a universal fact, as valid in the Ukraine in the 30's as in Germany in the 40's, or for that matter, if at a much more modest scale, in the Balkans in the 80's⁵.

The narrative picks up when the terror of the thirties does so. This makes sense, as the terror was not just abstract faceless statistics but also individual tragedy as it struck into the charmed circle around Stalin itself, the real subject of the book. Kirov was a Stalin favourite, especially close after the death of Stalins second wife. But so often with favourites, there is the danger of disillusionment, and after a few years Stalin started to resent him, maybe even becoming jealous of him⁶. He was sent to Leningrad. Once entering a building his body-guard was detained momentarily, walking up the stairs alone he was attacked by a young man and shot to death. The loyal body-guard was shortly then disposed of in a clumsily arranged car accident. The young man was interrogated and induced to mention a few names, and so the whole terror with its show-trials was publicly initiated, with the first principal victims being the old allies Kamenev and Zinoviev. Kirov was given a state funeral, with Stalin playing the role of the inconsolate friend, yet with rampant rumours that he had masterminded the assassination. It obviously served a purpose, and the author compares it to the 'Reichtags' fire⁷. The terror was unleashed, run by internal security, and conducted through a succession of sadistic henchmen, each of them reaching an appropriate end. Their names are no longer of any interest, although Montefiori certainly pays attention to them, replete with thumbnail character sketches. This meant the increased power of the security forces and the ominous role they were to play during most of the Soviet period⁸ It also meant the rise of Beria, a fellow Georgian,

⁵ As Stalin is reputed to have said. One death is a tragedy, many are just a matter of statistics

⁶ Montefiori refers to some internal voting in the Politburo, in which many ballots the names of Stalin and some of his closer cohorts had been struck out repeatedly, but only Kirovs relatively unscathed. The whole thing was hushed up, and hence one wonders how the author got hold of it, unless one implicitly believes the old adage to the effect that everything that ever happens always leaves some sort of trace.

⁷ The author has Stalin enthusiastically reading and learning about Hitlers night of long knives, just before the start of the show trials.

⁸ In 1953 under Krustjov, it is said that the army turned against KGB, signalling a brief thaw during his years. The KGB supposedly started to revive in connection with the Hungarian crisis under the tutelage of Andropov the mentor of Gorbachov, who incidentally never turned forcefully against the KGB. Putin, as we all know, is a former KGB-agent.

who was able to keep his prominent position (with a few setbacks at the end) throughout the reign of Stalin. The terror touched directly a large part of the party organisation, effectively destroying any potential opposition to the rule of Stalin (or so at least is the rationale), reaching into the very inner recesses of power. No one could feel himself secure, no matter how high up in the hierarchy. The wife of the President Kalinin was arrested giving the husband the perfect excuse to turn away any request of assistance. After all when his influence was insufficient even to help himself, how could he exercise power to help others⁹? Stalin's family, the in-laws of his second wife, were ravaged. This was used by Stalin, both to make a distinction between Stalin the private man, and Stalin the human incarnation of Soviet power. It also put pressure on his cohorts to suffer similar sacrifices of their own.

Some of the features of the terror still puzzle people. Why those deliberate show-trials, and those concocted confessions? What kind of absurd farce? And the matter of guilt? To outsiders this might be a moot question, once you think of the entire party as collectively guilty, why should we concern us about the finer points. Let criminals annihilate each other. It becomes more interesting if you seriously try to delve into the motivating psychology. Guilt was not the question of what you may have done, but what you might have done, or worse, might be doing¹⁰.

But people who can be named and connected to the circles of powers, have a certain individuality in the eyes of posterity, and their fates can even be graced by the touch of tragedy. But for most of the victims, with no connections to the inner recesses of the party, their role is merely to add to the statistics. There were campaigns against saboteurs (how otherwise could the failure of production plans be accounted for? or the fatality rates so high?) and certain quotas of arrests were assigned to and often surpassed by local bosses, Beria in particular being very efficient. This must have created an almost intolerable atmosphere of fear and suspicion, where in principle anyone could be an informer¹¹. Those times are well documented by later memoirs, but at the time serious literature had to be allegorical¹². The terror did not stop by the war, but continued throughout it, and beyond it. It deeply stamped the society, which until the end of the Gorbachov years remained very closed and insulated from the outside world¹³, and its reputation as an inhuman repressive society firmly lodged in the minds of many, except those who clinged to it as a potential workers paradise and the only effective stand against a capitalist world. It is hard to directly compare it with Nazi-Germany, but one may argue that even if you were a Jew the terror during its pre-war years of the thirties would not have been nearly as

⁹ An insignificant man holding a purely ceremonial role, he was probably as happy having his wife out of the way so he could engage himself unharrassed in his affairs with young ballerinas

¹⁰ This is a mentality that starts to resurface in the west, in connection with the hysterical obsession with terrorism. It is noteworthy that Stalin always referred to his enemies as terrorists.

¹¹ Friendships are crucial to most people, and in such a climate the powers of sensing trust must have been proportionally sharpened

¹² One may think of Bulgakov among many others

¹³ I remember e.g. a visit to Budapest in 1983, chancing upon a tour-bus with SU license plates. Its presence was like a visit from a different planet. Eastern Europe, even if beyond the Iron curtain, seemed so much closer in mentality.

pervasive as the Soviet one¹⁴. During the war it was of course different, at least to the Jews, otherwise the German Civilians in general were pampered until the very end.

Montefiori, in spite of his meticulous account, has no ambitions to document the terror as such, his point of view is always that of Stalins entourage, and as it is revealed by extant sources. He claims that his point of his biography is to show that Stalin was not demonic, that this is a too simplistic explanation of the phenomenon that was Stalinism. In fact he also wants to prove that Stalins power was not dictatorial until the early thirties¹⁵, and that he was in fact constrained by his cohorts in the party. It is not entirely clear what the purpose is. Whether to soften the picture of Stalin by presenting his humane sides (something that would be politically impossible with the picture of Hitler), or to show that human qualities of warmth and concern can reside, side by side, with monstrosity. I would prefer to believe the latter. Stalin is presented as the caring father, delighted by his daughter Svetlana, but frustrated by his sons¹⁶. A caring father maybe, but mostly an absent one. As to being a dutiful son, he left his mother alone down in Georgia, where she was actually, if we are to believe the author, assiduously looked after by Beria¹⁷, and almost never visited her¹⁸. One characteristic of a dictator, as well as his most devoted courtiers, is a capacity for hard, relentless work¹⁹. They kept long hours, lived under excruciating pressure, and drank a lot. Some of them, like Beria, also conducted an extensive love-life²⁰. Stalin himself is claimed by the author to have been rather puritanical in matters sexual²¹ and fairly shy with women, (although courted by many), eventually settling down with a house-keeper assigned extended duties. The fact that he had met his second wife, while she was only seventeen, and he at least twice her age, says something of his sexual proclivities²².

¹⁴ The anti-semitic restrictions became more and more severe, until at the end of the 30's, the Jews complained that they were treated almost as bad as American Negroes. But that was only the beginning, we now know.

¹⁵ He even speculates that a decisive change in Stalins mentality occurred at the hushed-up suicide of his second wife

¹⁶ His eldest son by his first marriage, was captured by the Germans. Stalin refused to have him exchanged, ostensibly out of egalitarian reasons. The son later committed suicide in captivity, which very much gratified Stalins sense of honor. His youngest son turned out to be a totally irresponsible playboy and alcoholic. Constantly womanizing and pursuing an inept career as an air-force man, repeatedly demoted by his exasperated father. He died only a few years later than his father, worn out by alcoholism

¹⁷ A portrait of his hanging prominently next to one of Stalin in her bedroom

¹⁸ It is also reported that when learning that her son became some kind of Tsar she remarked that he ought to have become a priest instead. A remark supposedly delighting Stalin.

¹⁹ Stalin regularly took long vacations, often of several months duration, in the clement climate of the south. He had built for himself a variety of different dachas. His cohorts were invited, sometimes for extended stays. The blessings were mixed. Not to go when summoned was out of the question, to stay tied down, an ordeal, testing the ingenuity of a guest to the limits.

²⁰ And the successive heads of the secret police nurtured an obsessive interest in kinky sex

²¹ and possibly hen-pecked by his wife

²² Beria is reported to have courted one woman, but being soon sidetracked by her fourteen-year old daughter. Her mother told her not to give in until she had secured an apartment, a dacha, and a steady provision...

And in what does the work of a dictator consist in? Almost no clues are given in the book, only that Stalin when not reading, eating or sleeping was constantly at his desk, working on his papers, which he carried wrapped up in newspapers, disdainful of briefcases. But maybe the most interesting thing about Stalin as a private man was his voracious reading habits. Montefiori reports approvingly of Stalins ostensible erudition, that he was an active reader, often scribbling notes in the margins, and that his library contained some twenty-thousand well-thumbed volumes²³. Most of his reading seems to have concerned history, out of which he no doubt drew much inspiration. But he also read a lot of foreign literature and admired Dostoevski, whom he naturally banned²⁴. His interest in literature he shared with many of his Bolshevik comrades²⁵, and this is not too surprising giving the bookish nature of Marxism. Many of the Bolshheviks were in fact constantly engaged in debating the finer points of their ideology. This does not contradict the fact that many others were almost illiterate rogues, but on the other hand under no pressure to prove their workers credentials. Stalin cultivated writers, Gorky, whom he enticed to leave his Italian exile, was the most obvious example of a distinguished connection²⁶. His relations to Mandelstam, Pasternak, Bulgakov, Babel and others were characterized by mutual fascination, occasionally fatal. Stalin was an avid visitor to the opera²⁷ and the theatre, a pattern of cultural consumption also incidentally shared with Hitler, and which would nowadays be rather exceptional in a politician²⁸. It is hard not to draw the conclusion that this was not only an expression of personal quirkiness but reflected habits and ambitions of people growing up at the end of the 19th century. Although he lacked the gift of literary composition himself, he was, according to the verdict of the author, able to write good and clear prose when challenged²⁹. No doubt Stalin was an intelligent man with an impressive memory capacity (like Hitler and Napoleon), but surely his intelligence was primarily one of shrewdness rather than

²³ During fifty years of reading, this translates into more than a book per day. This corresponds to an unlikely pace, unless most books were only skimmed.

²⁴ His literary sophistication is to some extent contradicted by his preference for movies, at least as manifested during his twilight years. When it came to movies he not seldom displayed attitudes, according to his private projectionist and selector of fare, only to be expected in an uneducated man, mistaking artistic reality for actuality.

²⁵ It has been reported to me that at the height of the Civil War, Trotsky was engaged in an extensive correspondence on literary criticism

²⁶ The exact nature of Gorkys duplicity in Stalinism remain vague, certainly Montefiori makes no attempt to clarify it, except to suggest that Gorky certainly was poisoned on Stalins order, although his family remained connected to the court of Stalin. A German writer with similar ties to Hitler would certainly be shunned nowadays, although suffering death at the hand of the latter, might have softened the verdict of posterity.

²⁷ He personally oversaw a musical competition, with Shostakovich and Prokofiev as advisors, to produce a new national anthem during the war-years. An anthem familiar to all sports enthusiasts exuding invincibility. It may not be surprising that Putin has recently revived it, as yet another item of Stalinistic nostalgia to be treasured.

²⁸ The French Presidents maybe the only noteworthy exceptions

²⁹ Hobsbawm waxes about the pedagogical clarity of his work on Communism, although I doubt that such commendable efforts would be found sustained throughout his collected works.

reflective analytic nature, his supreme talent being the scheming of power-struggle and the instinctive ability to exploit personal relations, so indispensable for any man of power. He may have nourished phantasies of being a great scientist as well as commander, but as the affair of Lysenko shows without any doubt, he had severe limitations of judgement on that score. (His distrust of doctors, which would eventually have fatal consequences, should on the other hand, I suspect, be laid at the door of his hypochondria and fear of death³⁰, a distrust liable to be indulged by even the most rational of scientific minds under similar circumstances.)

The great working capacity of a dictator coupled with a love of the tiny detail, can, I think, be partly explained, by his total immersion in his rule, as if it would be a creation purely of his imagination, in which he has total control and can play the role of God (perhaps not unlike that of the relationship of a novelist to his novel)³¹. This I think is particular clear in the case of Napoleon ³², but also Stalin and Hitler. On the other hand if we take more recent brutes like Idi Amin there are no longer any articulated visions, only the sustenance of animal desire. One may in view of that inquire into the ultimate reality sense of a dictator, are they at bottom solipsists? The psychic perversity of a Stalin or a Hitler surely go beyond that of thin-skinned neurotics. On the other hand claims for their insanity are far from being original and have very little explanatory value. After all most madmen only rave about being Napoleon, few actually work them out on a grand scale, with catastrophic results³³

In what way did Stalin and his entourage constitute an anomaly? Compared to the Nazi phenomenon, they seem to fit into a classical tradition. Western models of the 18th and 19th century are clearly inappropriate, Stalin used to identify himself with Ivan the Terrible, while the Ancient Romans and the Persians, along with various nomadic empires (like the Turkish and the Monghul) may be the most instructive. Stalin in the middle of his entourage appears more than anything else as a Godfather among his mafia underlings, at least as rendered by Montefiori, true to his deliberately myopic perspective. Going beyond the immediate court his role is that of the tyrant, feared and loved by his people, never shy of using force indiscriminantly. Predecessors of the past are legion. His antics, barbarian by our standards, fit well into more traditional molds of what a ruler is expected to behave. The peculiarity would be the technological advance upon more ancient models, and the peculiarity of an ideology, which apart from many religious overtones, also possessed, at least in the eyes of many critics, insidious features, contributing independantly to atrocities

³⁰ Stalin had a fear of flying, and was terrified whenever during his flight to Teheran, the plane, guarded by twenty-seven fighters, hit an air-pocket. Later he avoided flights altogether. It is also symptomatic that the present dictatator of North-Korea spent a week in transit by train, on a recent visit to Moscow

³¹ The extensive ambitions, refered to as above, are reminiscent of those of an adolescent, when the world and the opportunities seem endless and unrestricted

³² Once exiled on Elba, he was not unable to resist the impulse of creating a mini-country of it, until he got bored with the limited canvas and set off for Paris

³³ In fact in a reported interview of Stalin after the war, the latter refered to Hitler as a gifted man. Only a gifted man, not a madman, could have united the German people to stand by him, even in catastrophic adversity, he argued. One may also dig up further evidence of collegiate feelings on the part of Stalin for his foe.

and human disasters³⁴.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was for many Western leftist a terrible shock and a defining moment, putting Stalin on par with Hitler, and thus leading to a rejection. On the other hand more devoted Communists, like the historian Hobsbawm, saw it as an act of Realpolitik, after all what choice did Stalin really have? It was at least a gaining of time. The author treats the reader to a visit by Ribbentrop, as well as a visit by Molotov to Berlin, meeting Hitler³⁵. The role of Molotov is an ambiguous one in history as well as in the narrative provided by Montefiori. Like everyone else in the charmed circle he was a 'yes-man', always ultimately deferring to Stalin. Yet as old comrades he could take certain liberties in his dealings with the supreme leader, contradict him, differ and argue. But of course in the end it came to the same thing. Molotov appears without any charisma, pedantic, vain, careful without any extravagance. Devoted to his Jewish wife Polina, and deferring to her as well as to his comrade in arms. Still along with Mikoyan and Chrustjov he appears as the most sympathetic in the entourage, or at least someone with whom some measure of identification is possible. The result of the pact gave Stalin breathing space, which he used to carve up a large part of Poland, to reoccupy the Baltic states (an integral part of the Russian empire since the early 18th century) and to try the same with Finland. But as is well-known, Finland did not prove to be another Baltic Banana-republic, and the attempts of conquest were repulsed. This indicated the sorrow state of the Russian army³⁶, Stalin having after all killed or deported during the terror much of the competent command. Eventually the Russians prevailed, as superiority of numbers and resources always will dominate in the end. Yet Finland was not annexed, although it had to suffer a punitive treaty, losing Karelia and the important city of Viborg.

The truly critical moment for Stalin, as well as for the Soviet Union, was the German attack. Its ability to prevail and eventually to triumph is by many seen as the supreme justification of its existence, namely that its role in history was to crush Nazi-Germany and hence save the world from itself. This is at least the attitude taken by Hobsbawm. According to Montefiori Stalin was totally unprepared for the attack, having discounted intelligence to the contrary. Furthermore according to the author, he was unable to understand the mindset of a Hitler, and had been convinced that the latter would not find it to his advantage to go ahead. It is always very hard to know what people really are thinking, even to those doing the actual thinking themselves, and much of this must be taken as speculation. Montefiori further claims that the attack brought about a mental collapse of the leader, he retired to one of his dachas and was totally paralysed, taking no effective action at all. This, according to Montefiori, was a golden opportunity to get rid of him. But why should people do that? Instead his entourage collected themselves forming a kind of war-cabinet of sorts, travelling to Stalin offering him its leadership. He was relieved, as he probably, according to the author, was expecting to be arrested instead, and thus readily accepted it returning back to action. The story sounds almost too neat.

³⁴ In other words the idea, that the failure of Communism as a more human political alternative, is not at all due to its distortion by maniacs like Stalin, but is intrinsic to the system, and thus is bound to fail no matter how often the experiment is repeated

³⁵ Stalin and Hitler never met personally, depriving the world of a marvellous photo-opportunity

³⁶ Montefiori emphasizes its backwardness, and the great prestige still accorded the cavalry

Yet the German advances were spectacular, just like they had been previously on the Western Front and down in the Balkans. Large parts of the Russian army were simply destroyed and it seemed only to be a matter of time before they would reach Moscow. Rumours have it that Stalin had a train ready to take him and his government deep into Siberia, but the Germans got bogged down, the weather turned cold and nasty (and after all they had only been equipped for a short summer campaign) and some Russian troops rallied under more competent commanders that had been called back from detention and disgrace³⁷ Stalin decided to stay, and this according to the book, lifted general morale.

Moscow was not conquered, and an attempt to take Leningrad was foiled at the same time, leading instead to a siege with the purpose of starving the city to death³⁸. Hitler did decide not to take Moscow after all, maybe discouraged by the example of the empty triumph of Napoleon, instead he decided to reach the oil-fields of the Caucasus, so crucial to the German war-effort. His successes of the summer of 1942 were almost as spectacular as that of the preceeding summer, with great Soviet losses. And than there was Stalingrad.

What brought this total change of fortunes? Montefiori hints at two things. First that Stalin actually had reserves, some 700'000 men stationed in the Far East, which could be called back once Japan showed no aggressive interest in that part of the world. And secondly that the production of armaments beyond the Ural proceeded at a great pace, no doubt abetted by slave labour³⁹ Anyway the rest is history.

Montefiori does as usual not address the global issues, his ambition, as noted before, is to merely be the fly on the wall. Hence we are treated to an exasperated Churchill on a visit to Moscow, giving Stalin reassurances of a second front, as well as the meeting at Teheran in 1943 when also Roosevelt joined. Much is made of the apparant rapport between Stalin and the latter, and Montefiori is able to present a few undisclosed anecdotes through the testimony of a surviving British interpreter. Stalin liked Roosevelt, the author assures us, finding him the strongest champion Capitalism could muster, while Churchill was the one with the strongest personality. Truman he supposedly despised.

The truce between Western Capitalism and Soviet Stalinism was as expected of short duration. For a few years the West had the triumph - the Atom Bomb⁴⁰. And Stalin realised that he needed it too⁴¹, and a crash-program was set up, headed by Beria, who knew that his life depended on the succesful completion of that task, and thus to his chagrin realised that he was at the mercy of the scientists⁴². In a few years the balance of

³⁷ It is rumoured that the Russian troops were infiltrated by security ordered to shoot anyone tempted by desertion. This certainly has the ring of truth to it. After all it was common wisdom in the past that the common soldier should fear his own command more than the enemy.

³⁸ The desperate plight of the Leningraders is well-documented and stand out among the tales of civilian sufferings that survived the war.

³⁹ This is interesting. A strong argument against the planned economy being its inefficiency. On the other hand in times of war, planned economy appears to be the rule, even in Capitalist economies.

⁴⁰ One of Bertrand Russells more hairbrained suggestions was to take advantage of that fact and bomb the Soviet Union to smithens.

⁴¹ He refered to the bomb as barbaric, and disapproved of its use on Japan, they being defeated anyway

⁴² Some of which were in camps, as described by Solzhenitsyn in *The First Circle*, in which the author has some scathing things to say about Stalins various scientific pretensions.

terror was achieved, a state to usher us into the era of the Cold War (a state actually still prevailing, although most people prefer not to think of this unpleasant fact).

Montefiori claims that after the war Stalin became more sentimental, but also more deadly [sic]. He certainly became more vulnerable to his natural vanity. The author tells the story about Stalin wanting to participate in the Victory Parade riding on a white horse. He had never mounted a horse before, and was terrified, and the horse predictably reared, and Stalin desperately grabbed the mane, but was thrown off. It came to Zhukorov instead to play the part, which afforded him no problems. Stalin was very jealous of the glory coming the way of his main general. Furthermore the title of Generalissimo was presented to him, along with a fitting snow-white uniform with all the works. Stalin at first held off. Would he like to be in the same camp as a Franco? And the uniform, was he going to be promoted to a doorman⁴³? In the end he acquiesced, as with other attempts to humour him.

The postwar years were years of decline. Physical and mental. His entourage noticed it of course, and sometimes thought his actions were mad. The repression and the terror continued, and the inner circles started to fear for their lives. Beria and Malenkov, as well as Mikoyan and Molotov started to stick together comforting one another as a desperate strategy of survival, as they were normally racked by mutual loathing. Stalin ruled at the dinner-table, during long extended orgies of drinking⁴⁴. He grew fatter, became more and more forgetful and cantankerous. And, as Montefiori puts it, supreme power may sometimes have no outlet but to bore, and as he got older, he started more and more to reminiscence of old times. Especially that of his exile, apparently providing the happiest moments of his life. Which if anything should be a comment on the difference between Tsarist camps and Soviet ones. A new paranoid scheme was formed, the framing of the doctors plot. Most of those were Jewish, as the anti-semitism of Stalin was becoming more and apparent⁴⁵.

And so the end. Early March 1953 at his dacha at Kuntsevo. The master does not appear in the morning, the personal guard is too terrified to find out what has happened. In the evening they enter, finding the old dictator in a pitiful state on the floor, his pants thoroughly wetted. He is moved onto a divan, where he will remain for a few days. Medical attention is delayed, as no one dares to take the responsibility, and besides medical competence is imprisoned. Obviously quick action might have saved him, at least for another few years, as it is, when medical attention is finally given it is too late. His entourage is monitoring him closely, just as they are monitoring themselves. Beria is alternating between moments of exultation and despair wishing for a speedy death. The room stinks of stale urine. He is sinking fast. The pulse getting fainter and quicker, the breathing slower and shallower, with longer and longer hiatuses. His bloodpressure is slowly increasing. At the end he opens up one eye, filled with the fear of death. He is slowly

⁴³ Actually an embellishment on my part. According to Montefiori, he merely asked whether they wanted him to look like a doorman. But that story might be an embellishment as well

⁴⁴ His cohorts, eager to please, had to keep up, often reaching extreme forms of inebriation (passing out, wetting themselves).

⁴⁵ An anti-semitism of the old traditional style, allowing many an exception, and not to be confused with the far more effective and chilling Nazi-kind

drowning in his own fluids. As he is about to expire he raises his arm, as if reviving. But it is but the last desperate act of gaining air. He falls on the floor, and is immediately pounded on by the doctors in a vain attempt to get his heart beating again. Krustjov cries out to leave the poor man alone, he is after all dead. Tears well forward from the eyes of his court, and Beria sneaks away in his limosine to Moscow to seize power, being immediately followed by his rivals in their own limosines. It is a race of life and death. While Valencha, his maid of extended duties, drops heavily to her knees and throws herself on to the corpse with the uninhibited grief of the common people. To once again give an example of Montefioris intermittently hackneyed prose.

So this is the outline of the story that the author presents. The story that is supposed to hold the readers attention. Is it true? Once cannot but ask the question again. Fiction invites suspended judgement, but a historical narrative should always be viewed critically all along the way. This is harder when it is presented as by the aid of fictional devices, some of which have been referred to above. One always wants to believe the narrative. The reader has of course no possibility of checking sources. What kind of sources? Some are official, and as such probably doctored or very formal. Others are taken from memoirs, and as such subjected to special pleading, and the author himself admits over and over again in his footnotes that this and that can never be trusted. There is naturally nothing definitive about this biography. Others are sure to follow.

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