

Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin: The Biography of a Dictator*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015. 418 pp.

These days the shelves in Moscow bookshops bulge with books about Stalin by Russian authors. As Oleg Khlevniuk points out in the introduction to his beautifully constructed, lucid, and brief new life of the dictator, many of these are mere sensationalism, “pro-Stalin rambblings ... carelessly cobbled together out of anecdotes, rumors, and fabrications.” He is equally scornful of the apparently more substantial biographies which do show a nodding acquaintance with the archives, but present a Stalin whose admitted crimes were the unavoidable price that had to be paid for modernizing the country and thus enabling it to defeat Hitler. Such ideas now reflect a widespread orthodoxy inside Russia. They put Stalin back in the pantheon of outstanding leaders—Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great—without whom, it is said, Russia could never have achieved greatness. When he looks at the ways in which myths about the Stalinist past are being “exploited by unscrupulous commentators and politicians” to poison Russian minds, Khlevniuk asks gloomily, “Could it really be that Russia in the twenty first century is in danger of repeating the mistakes of the twentieth?”

One consequence, Khlevniuk believes, is that his research now has “more than scholarly relevance.” And indeed his biography does provide a yardstick of fact and measured judgment against which to measure other interpretations of Stalin’s personality and career. His work is solidly rooted in the documents with which he has become intimately acquainted in a lifetime of working in the Russian archives, on memoirs and the secondary literature, and on a wide reading of Western as well as Russian scholarship. He is properly sceptical of all his sources, and he avoids all sensationalism. If there is no evidence for a well-known incident in Stalin’s biography, he says so. If there is no solid grounds to explain some twist in the story, he refuses to speculate. He has a short way with stories such as the accusation, for example, that Stalin was an informer for the Tsarist secret police, which depends on one document forged by Russian emigres. He is, in short, a historian you feel you can trust.

The picture of Stalin which Khlevniuk presents is familiar enough in the West: the ambitious Georgian provincial, the voracious reader whose narrow mind is hemmed in by ideology, the wilful and tireless administrator, the paranoid tyrant, the careless womanizer, the occasionally sentimental father. He does not spin elaborate psychological theories about the roots of Stalin's behavior, beyond observing that his childhood, though hard, was no harder than for anyone else of his class, time, and place. He rehearses the medical evidence for his final illness, but comments "[H]istorians are not doctors. While keeping their subjects' possible ailments in mind, they try not to dwell on them."

Khlevniuk structures his account with an unusual but elegant device. He frames each chapter of his story with an incident from Stalin's last days on earth: the raucous dinner at his dacha with his intimate underlings, Malenkov, Beria, Khrushchev, and Bulganin on the night of 1 March 1953; the terror of his personal staff when, after many hours, they discover him moribund on the floor; his associates' unwillingness to take responsibility for calling in the doctors; his death three days later, his lying in state, the popular grief at his funeral and the mixture of satisfaction and bewilderment which followed. As one incident succeeds the last, it triggers off a flashback, a disquisition on one or other aspect of Stalin's life: his education in a Georgian orthodox seminary, his early revolutionary years, the mechanisms by which he acquired and exercised power, the bloody irrationality of the Great Terror, his brutal management of his remarkably competent but terrified colleagues, his own rise to competence as a war leader, the senile paranoia of his last years.

Khlevniuk ends with a harsh judgment of Stalin, his system, and the enduring damage it inflicted on Russia: the deliberate atomization of society, the incompetence of much economic planning, the growing gap between those who enjoyed insecure privilege at the top of society, and the miserable life led by those, especially the peasants, who found themselves at the bottom. He is under no illusion that developing a modern industrial economy was bound to be painful and costly, and that the funds for investment would have to be squeezed out of the countryside. But he entirely rejects the idea of the apologists that Stalin's economic policies were

“the expression of an objective historical need.” Stalin did indeed win a victory of which the Soviet people were entitled to remain proud. But that is no excuse, says Khlevniuk, for trying to maintain that the bloody methods he used, in war as in peace, were “regrettable but necessary and effective.” He does not speculate about alternative history. But he leaves little doubt that he thinks there was a far better way.

Written with fluent sobriety, and humor (“It is rarely helpful when politicians involve themselves in the interpretation of past events”), the book is a constant pleasure to read. No book of history is ever definitive: new facts trickle out, new writers bring new perspectives to bear. That is the charm of the genre. But some history books can become classics for later generations. Khlevniuk’s *Stalin* is likely to be one of them.

Khlevniuk has been very fortunate in his translator Nora Seligman Favorov. She has rendered his book into delightfully flexible, clear, and fluent English. Her contribution was fully recognized when the judges of this year’s Pushkin House Book prize gave Khlevniuk’s book a special award as Best Russian Book in Translation.

Rodric Braithwaite

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Zuzanna Bogumił, Joanna Wawrzyniak, Tim Buchen, Christian Ganzer, and Maria Senina, *The Enemy on Display: The Second World War in Eastern European Museums*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2015. 190 pp.

The Enemy on Display is a collection of essays by an international team of scholars that analyzes how museums in Eastern Europe narrate World War II, and, specifically, how they present the image of the enemy. The case studies are focused on three museums—the Dresden City Museum, the Historical Museum of Warsaw, and the State Museum of the History of St. Petersburg—but they also touch upon other recently opened museums devoted to the period of 1939–45.