



The black farce of history

Neal Ascherson applauds Martin Amis for his honesty, but finds *Koba the Dread* inadequate as a book written to honour the victims of Stalin

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Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million

by Martin Amis
 306pp, Jonathan Cape, £16.99

Why laughter? The second world war killed some 50 million human beings; the Bolshevik revolution and the Soviet state killed at least 20 million between 1917 and Stalin's death in 1953. Why is Hitler no joke, while the deeds of Stalin (and Lenin) can be subjects for humour as well as horror?

In 1999, Martin Amis went to a meeting in the Conway Hall. It was about "Europe" and nothing to do with Soviet crimes, but his best friend Christopher Hitchens was on the platform and at one point observed that he had spent many an evening in this hall with "many an old comrade". The meeting broke into knowing guffaws, and Amis found himself laughing too. Afterwards, he asked himself why Hitler "elicits spontaneous fury and the other [Stalin, "Bolshevism"] elicits spontaneous laughter". Partly, he thought, it was self-mocking fondness for an old hope, an aid to forgetting the 20 million. But it was also the chasm between the nobility of the hope, the splendour of the propaganda about achievement, and the squalor of the reality. "It seems that humour cannot be evicted from the gap between words and deeds." Amis consults Shakespeare and concludes that the story of Russia between 1917 and 1953 is not a tragedy and certainly not a comedy of any kind, but "a black farce like *Titus Andronicus*".

This book, coming after Amis's memoir *Experience*, belongs to a process of autobiography. At one level, it is about history; Amis made himself read through a library about the Soviet Union to distil this raging, incredulous account of its crimes against human beings and humanity, "the collapse of the value of human life". But *Koba the Dread* is also a halt by a man in middle life, a pause on the road to ask questions, which cannot be avoided if that life is to be honestly told.

Amis has loved two men who have found reasons not to dismiss what happened after October 1917 in Russia as an inexcusable moral atrocity. These two are his late father, Kingsley Amis, and Christopher Hitchens. Kingsley Amis, before his spectacular conversion to the right, was a member of the Communist party from 1941 to 1956. Hitchens was never a Stalinist, but he stayed loyal to an intellectual Trotskyist view of the Bolshevik revolution, which honoured Lenin and blamed Stalin for deforming the revolution into a state-capitalist dictatorship. Amis is asking how could they have. But of course he is also asking how could I have, how can I continue to love them?

Logically enough, *Koba the Dread* ends with two letters: one to Hitchens and the other to his father's ghost. But Hitchens's voice, especially, turns up all through these pages: arguments in the 1970s when they both worked on the *New Statesman*, phone calls in moments of despair or bafflement. MA: "I'm wondering about the distance between Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany." CH: "Don't fall for that, Mart. Don't fall for moral equivalence." And Mart doesn't quite fall, although a lot of this book is asking why he should not.

What really was the difference between the Little Moustache and the Big Moustache? Stalin had more time, more space, cold and darkness in which to kill more people than Hitler. Lenin destroyed civil society, which Hitler never achieved. But when Amis admits that he feels the Jewish Holocaust was "worse" than Stalin's crimes, he qualifies it: "In attempting to answer the question why, one enters an area saturated with qualms." He quotes Orlando

Figes, to the effect that Nazism "spat in the face of the Enlightenment", whereas the Russian revolution was "an experiment which the human race was bound to make" - and yet did not Stalin's betrayal of that experiment make him "worse" ?

Most of *Koba the Dread* is Martin Amis's own recapitulation of horrors: the massacres of the civil war, the famine of 1922, collectivisation and the "war" against the peasantry, which ended in the Terror Famine of 1933, the great purges of 1937-38, the show trials, the living death of the gulag and - after the "Great Patriotic War"- the "rancid, crapulent phase" of Stalinism which ended with the dictator's death as he prepared to launch an exterminatory purge against the Jews. He draws on many works, but above all on Solzhenitsyn and on the books of Robert Conquest, friend and counsellor to himself and his father. When Conquest's *The Great Terror* was first published in 1968, it was coldly received on the left. Every *homme civilisé*, *homme de la gauche* claimed to know by then that Stalin had been a monster, guilty of dreadful crimes against innocent people - but wasn't Conquest just a "cold warrior", and was he not inflating the victim-figures for his own political ends? He was not. As the truth oozed out, it became clear that Conquest had been entirely correct. When the publishers wondered about a fresh subtitle for the latest edition, Conquest suggested: "I Told You So, You Fucking Fools." He was richly, opulently entitled to say that.

Amis offers an anthology of witnesses, to both the suffering of victims and the callousness of executioners, torturers and rulers - those who scribbled "Shoot them all!" at the bottom of list after list of names. Many of those voices were once heard throughout the world - Eugenia Ginzburg, Varlam Shalamov, Nadezhda Mandelstam, Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* above all - but they are being rapidly forgotten now. Amis is right to let them speak again, and he is haunted by the thought that the memory of the 20 million dead is fading too. But that is more the consequence of Russian indifference, in a country where there has been no coherent reckoning with the past, rather than of the west's uneasy "laughter of forgetting". The west and its intellectuals are uneasy because they do remember, and Amis is over the top in proclaiming that "everybody knows of Auschwitz and Belsen. Nobody knows of Vorkuta and Solovetsky. Everybody knows of Himmler and Eichmann. No-body knows of Yezhov and Dzerzhinsky." They know all right.

Surprisingly, the weakest element in the book is its handling of Stalin. A brilliant novelist reaches into the dark for this creature but fails to reconstruct a character out of the slimy bits he can feel. Amis falls back on the weak idea that he was mad, an envious loner driven into homicidal lunacy by the taste of power, and argues that when he did sensible things, like defeating Hitler, he stopped being mad. "... The invasion [of 1941] pressed Stalin into a semblance of mental health. Certainly, in August 1945, remission ended and the patient's sanity once again fell apart". Unhappily, Stalin was not mad. He was sane, but callous and cruel on a scale so staggering that hopeful views of human nature crumple.

In a way, Amis recognises this in several wonderful sentences about the two dictators. "Hitler-Stalin tells us this, among other things: given total power over another, the human being will find his thoughts turn to torture". Or this: "Of the many characteristics shared by the two ideologies... one in particular proved wholly corrosive: the notion that mercilessness is a virtue". Or this: "Both these stories are full of terrible news about what it is to be human." But the really terrible news is that you do not have to be in-sane to sacrifice the lives of millions for the vision of a better world.

At the end, Amis challenges the two men who mean so much to him. He asks Hitchens: do you admire Lenin's and Trotsky's terror, which made Stalin possible? Even if they had created paradise, would you want to live in it at the price of 15 million lives? And to his father's shade: your emotional need to believe in the brotherhood of man, the possible Just City - don't you see that the joke is here, that "the breakdown, the ignobility, is inherent in the ideal"? Here Amis closes, in effect remarking that "you don't have to be mad to believe in liberty, fraternity and equality, but it helps". It's inadequate for a book written to honour dead millions who, in spite of their grotesque betrayal, continued to hope against hope.

• Neal Ascherson's *Stone Voices: The Search for Scotland* (Granta) is published on September 16.