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Dreaded questions**Martin Amis explores the Soviet catastrophe of Stalin's 30-year tyranny**- Reviewed by [Kenneth Baker](#), Chronicle Art Critic

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Koba the Dread

Laughter and the Twenty Million

By Martin Amis

HYPERION/TALK MIRAMAX; 306 PAGES; \$24.95

Attempts to reckon with the reality of nuclear weapons have appeared sporadically in Martin Amis' work, like a recurring nightmare, since his story collection "Einstein's Monsters" (1987).

The trail of nuclear weapons leads back to the Cold War, to the Soviet Union and World War II. And anyone who wants to understand the Soviet Union -- or present-day Russia -- must understand the 30-year tyranny of Joseph Stalin.

That may explain the focus of Amis' new book: Stalin's reign -- probably the most murderous in history -- and its Bolshevik prelude.

"Koba" was the nickname Stalin adopted as a child, after a sort of Robin Hood figure in a popular novel of the time. "There are no names," Amis writes, "for what happened in the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1953 (although Russians refer, totemically, to 'the twenty million . . .')." "

Without his ever saying as much, Amis' survey of Stalin's mass starvation, torture and murder of his own countrymen gives new credence to the thought that today's potentates might willingly, even proudly, incinerate the planet to fulfill delusional visions of their own.

And when Amis describes the Bolshevik "politicization of sleep," readers may recognize a hard-core version of the rule of fear practiced by today's nuclear war-mongers.

"That is what they want," Amis writes, "the believers, the steely ones, that is what they live for: the politicization of sleep. They want politics to be going on everywhere all the time, politics permanent and circumambient."

As late as 1975, Amis notes, "it was considered tasteless or mean-spirited to be too hard on the Soviet Union. No one wanted to be seen as a 'red-baiter' -- or no one except my father [novelist Kingsley Amis]."

Amis wants to know how this was possible when, as survivors and historians have since made

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irrefutably clear, "a true description of the Soviet Union exactly resembled a demented slander of the Soviet Union," so horrible were the facts and aftermath of Stalin's rule.

In partial explanation Amis quotes historian Robert Conquest, who was a friend to Amis and his father: "The reality of Stalin's activities was often disbelieved," Conquest writes, "because they seemed to be unbelievable. His whole style consisted of doing what had previously been thought morally or physically inconceivable."

And Amis wants to understand how his father could have professed sincere support for Soviet communism for 15 years -- while Stalin was still alive -- before his later, more notorious, swerve to the political right. This inquiry makes a thin thread of connection with "Experience" (2000), Amis' engaging memoir and tribute to his father.

Yet another connected mystery fascinates Amis in "Koba the Dread."

"It has always been possible to joke about the Soviet Union," he writes, "just as it has never been possible to joke about Nazi Germany. This is not merely a question of decorum. In the German case, laughter automatically absents itself. . . . In the Soviet case. . . . laughter intransigently refuses to absent itself. Immersion in the facts of the Bolshevik catastrophe may make this increasingly hard to accept, but such an immersion will never cleanse that catastrophe of laughter."

As evidence he cites numerous jokes about the Soviet calamity, some invented by its victims.

But he devotes most of his energy to immersing the reader in "the facts of the Bolshevik catastrophe," which are appalling and irrevocably damning.

Amis the stylist cannot resist teasing out the lethal absurdities of Stalinism. By the late 1930s, Stalin's merciless tyranny made his paranoia pervade the populace, undermining all possibility of trust in others.

"You might denounce someone for fear of their denouncing you," Amis writes. "You could be denounced for not doing enough denouncing; the only disincentive to denunciation was the possibility of being denounced for not denouncing sooner, and so on."

At the end of "Koba the Dread," Amis quotes a letter of friendly but stern reproach to Christopher Hitchens for his lingering ad-

miration of Lenin and Trotsky. "They would not want your admiration," Amis writes, "if it failed to include an admiration for terror," for which Stalin had a supreme instinct.

Amis does not shrink from difficult questions about possible moral distinctions between Lenin and Stalin, Stalin and Hitler.

"Koba the Dread" is heartfelt but is, for Amis, an unshapely piece of work. Did he begin his research with a novel in mind, believing that the catastrophe of Stalinism was, like nuclear weapons, an enormity that any serious 21st century writer must confront?

In Amis' many quotations of Solzhenitsyn, Vassily Grossman and other novelists and witnesses of the Soviet calamity, one hears a breath of defeat before the task of processing this monstrosity of memory through contemporary fiction.

Amis worked his way back grotesquely to the Holocaust in "Time's Arrow" (1992), whose narrative in reverse imposes a sense of universal laws upended, appropriate to the imaginative task.

But he seems to have found "The Twenty Million" beyond the reach of any narrative but that of self-education.

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