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Gallows Humor

'Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million' by Martin Amis

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KOBA THE DREAD

Laughter and the Twenty Million

By Martin Amis

Talk Miramax. 306 pp. \$24.95

A summer ago, while making my way around the former Soviet Republic of Georgia, I met a middle-aged fellow named Stal-Ber. The name, he proudly explained, was a hyphenation of Stalin and Beria (Stalin's bloodthirsty chief of secret police). Not far from Stal-Ber's hut lies the town of Gori, Stalin's birthplace, where one can visit the Stalin Museum and pick up a keychain with the dictator's likeness at the gift shop. No part of the former Soviet Union suffered Stalin's wrath to the extent that Georgia did, and yet there, as elsewhere, the history books on the 20th century's most brutal leader have hardly been closed.

In his harrowing and strangely funny new work, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*, Martin Amis writes: "Stalin was an extremely popular leader. It is something of a humiliation to commit that sentence to paper, but there is no avoiding it." Nor can one avoid the popularity Stalin and the USSR enjoyed among Western writers and intellectuals, the author's father, Kingsley Amis, among them. The memoir part of this unique hybrid of memoir and history deals with a handful of these British apologists and utopians; it composes roughly the first and last 30 pages of this volume. The meat of this sandwich -- the 200 pages in between -- is a historical exposé of Stalin and Lenin that leaves no doubt as to the two dictators' legacies, their mindless vengefulness and staggering self-delusion.

Martin Amis may not be the first writer who comes to mind as the author of a nonfiction book on Stalin. And yet, in an unexpected way, this book is a logical continuation of his complicated oeuvre. Sentences such as "Stalin, then, had two reasons for assaulting the Ukrainian peasants: they were peasants, and they were Ukrainian" carry on the twisted logic of Amis's earlier linguistic assaults. In fact, Stalin (Koba was his childhood nickname) often comes across as one of Amis's violent London yobs, a ruthless idiot who, in this case, happens to assume power over an enormous country and nearly sends her to her grave.

Few writers can hop from Britain's Millenium Dome fiasco to Stalinist show trials in the space of a few paragraphs. Laughter, as the subtitle promises, is in abundance here. "There has never been a regime quite like it," Amis writes of Stalin's rule. "To have its subjects simultaneously quaking with terror, with hunger, with hypothermia -- and with laughter." As he charts the bloody progress of Stalin's Soviet Union, as famine and terror take their toll, as the country's best and brightest are sentenced to slow death in the gulag (or merely shot dead in the Lubyanka), as the numbers add up, as we approach the by-now-indisputable figure of 20 million Soviet citizens murdered and starved to death, Amis characteristically keeps the laughter close at hand. On Stalin's relationship with his mentor: "Stalin was Lenin's industrious, underbred mascot, his shaggy dog." On the Provisional Government of 1917: "An additional ten IQ points in Kerensky might have saved Russia from Lenin." On Lenin's end: "In his last ten months he was reduced to monosyllables. But at least they were

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political monosyllables: *vot-vot* (here-here) and *sezd-sezd* (congress-congress)."

The humor leads Amis to an inevitable moral dilemma, the one neatly summarized by the book's complete subtitle: "Laughter and the Twenty Million." How do we reconcile chortling at the follies of Bolshevism with the knowledge that we are dealing with one of the two or three worst crimes against humanity in the short history of our species? "It seems that the Twenty Million will never command the sepulchral decorum of the Holocaust," Amis writes. "The truth is that both these stories are full of terrible news about what it is to be human. They arouse shame as well as outrage. And the shame is deeper in the case of Germany." And yet most Western readers are not as familiar with the madness of the Stalin years as they are with Germany's plunge into mass psychosis. "Everybody knows of Auschwitz and Belsen. Nobody knows of Vorkuta and Solovetsky," Amis complains, referring to two gruesome Soviet labor camps.

Along with his treatise on Stalin, Amis presents something of a memoir, mostly a rebuttal aimed at his friend Christopher Hitchens, a former Trotskyite, and Kingsley Amis, once a member of the Communist Party. Standing alongside Stalin's monstrosity, the utopianism and intellectual arrogance of Britain's liberal elite seem like small potatoes indeed. These sections are not needed; the Bolshevik experience speaks for itself. Nevertheless, *Koba the Dread* is not easy to forget. Along with the laughter it offers the reader unfamiliar with Stalin's legacy a number that is the first step in understanding Russia's modern tragedy. That number, once again, is 20 million. •

Gary Shteyngart is the author of the novel "The Russian Debutante's Handbook."

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