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A shocking lack of decorum

(Filed: 01/09/2002)

Orlando Figes reviews *Koba the Dread* by Martin Amis

History is a debt the living repay to the dead. A good historian needs many qualities: imagination; judgment tempered by human empathy and understanding; perhaps a belief in the search for truth. But, above all, he needs humility. We don't write history to draw attention to ourselves.

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More than any other work of history, Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror* (1968) is a monument to the millions who vanished in the Stalinist purges. Published at a time when café intellectuals and students in the West were mesmerised by Marxism, it spelled out the ABC of Stalin's terror-state: mass arrests of the innocent; fabricated confessions extracted by torture; and the hell of the gulags.

In Soviet dissident circles *The Great Terror* was held in high esteem, even if the claim (on the front flap of this book) that it was "second only to Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* in undermining the USSR" is perhaps an exaggeration of its influence. I can't imagine Conquest claiming that himself.

Conquest ("Conquers") was a friend of Kingsley ("Kingers") Amis, the father ("Dad") of Martin. This is the pretext for *Koba the Dread*, a long historical essay on the Russian Revolution and Stalin (known as "Koba" to the Bolsheviks), placed between two personal sections, one at the beginning and one at the end.

The blurb claims that "Amis gives us perhaps the best one hundred pages ever written about Stalin". In fact, as a piece of history-writing, they are unoriginal and even second-rate. They remind me of a lot of undergraduate essays I have read: magpie-like with other people's work, sharp and clever (especially with words), over-quick to judgment, and full of muddled facts.

These "best one hundred pages" are based on modest reading - "several yards of books", as their author informs

BOOK INFORMATION

Title

Koba the Dread

Author

Martin Amis

Publisher

**Jonathan Cape,
£16.99, 306 pp**

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0224063030

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us. Amis makes a very little stretch extremely far, using long quotations and unacknowledged anecdotes to pad out his own work; but without any Russian sources (or so it would seem) there are inevitably gaps and distortions. Take his opening statement, full of moral outrage, where he wrongly claims that Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986) is the "only book" on the Soviet famine of 1931-4. There are several recent works in Russian, German and English. Outraged ignorance always looks ridiculous.

Amis is no fool. He seizes hold of all the right questions and gives them a good shake. How can we make sense of a senseless terror? How can we try to understand the inscrutable Stalin? How could he be so popular in a country he had terrorised? How can we begin to comprehend what people went through in the camps? Or how they survived? And the question which binds the book together: why in the West do we feel instinctively that the horrors perpetrated by the Stalinist regime were somehow not as "evil" as the Nazi Holocaust?

At times this ruthless questioning steps beyond the bounds of taste, as for example in the suggestion, which has caused outrage in Russia, that we cannot help but laugh when we think about the terror. I understand what Amis means when he says that there was an element of farce in the Bolshevik regime: the spirit of Gogol was alive and well in the Soviet bureaucracy. But to suggest, as Amis does, that there was something funny in a period of history when 20 million people were murdered by the state betrays a gross insensitivity.

Apart from the occasional flash of brilliance, when he brings a novelist's perspective to the dark inner workings of Stalin's mind, Amis lacks the wherewithal to make a cogent argument.

All too often he betrays a shallow understanding of Soviet politics. To cite just one example: in 1928 it was not, as he suggests, a choice of whether to collectivise or not (all the major Party leaders accepted the need for a faster tempo of agricultural collectivisation to support the Five Year Plan); rather it was a question of whether to collectivise through voluntary means, by using fiscal pressures, as Bukharin advocated, or forcibly, by Stalin's violent means.

More alarmingly, there are basic factual errors on almost every other page. To correct just a few: it was not Ivan the Terrible but Ivan III who was the first to style himself as "Tsar"; when Lenin accused Stalin of intolerable "rudeness" it was not *vobost* (a non-existent word) but *grubost* that he used; nowhere did Lenin write in *State and Revolution* that what the Party needed was "unquestioning obedience to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader" (and anyone who spends five minutes reading Lenin's text will see just how absurd that fabrication is); Nicholas II was not "known as Nicholas the Last" (I coined the phrase myself in *A People's Tragedy*); and his son, the Tsarevich Alexei, who perhaps outlived him by a few seconds on the night when they were murdered by the Bolsheviks, could not have been called Alexander IV, or "Alexander the Last", as Amis suggests, because Alexei and Alexander are two entirely different names.

However, it is not the history section of this book which really stinks, but the egocentric way in which Amis tries to link the fate of Stalin's Russia with his own experience in the personal sections. I don't mean the self-indulgent, boring discourse with Kingsley Amis and Christopher Hitchens - both once café communists - which is really little more than the usual undergraduate debate on the Russian Revolution and Stalin.

I mean the passage where Amis equates his own grief at the

(natural) death of his sister, tragic though that was, with the suffering of the millions in the Soviet Union whose loved ones were tortured and then killed by some sadist in a prison cell, or (worse) sent off as slaves to some gulag.

I mean the passage - despicable and shocking in its lack of decorum - where he compares the crying of his six-month-old daughter ("a weeping fit that began at the outer limit of primordial despair, and then steadily escalated" until "after an hour I was relieved by the nanny") with the night-time cries from "the deepest cellars of the Burtyrki Prison in Moscow during the Great Terror. That's why I cracked and called Caterina [the nanny]".

The wailing of his baby daughter (since nicknamed "Burtyrki" in the Amis family) prompted Amis to think of more than Stalin's torture victims: "Her cries had reminded me of the clinically explicable anguish of my younger boy who, at the age of one, was an undiagnosed asthmatic. She had reminded me of the perfect equipoise of nausea and grief, as the parent contemplates inexpressible distress."

And there you have it: Amis shares in the heart-rending grief of Soviet humanity. The true subject of his book is not Stalin, nor even his victims, but Amis the would-be historian, Amis brooding on the suffering of the world from the safety of his home.

- Orlando Figes's 'Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia' will be published by Allen Lane in October.

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var _hbEC=0,_hbE=new Array;function _hbEvent(a,b){b=_hbE[_hbEC++]=new Object();b._N=a;b._C=0;return b;} var  
hbx=_hbEvent("pv");hbx.vpc="HBX0100u";hbx.gn="a.telegraph.co.uk"; hbx.acct="DM550808OANC78EN3"; hbx.pndef="title";  
hbx.ctdef="full"; hbx.elf="!telegraph.";
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