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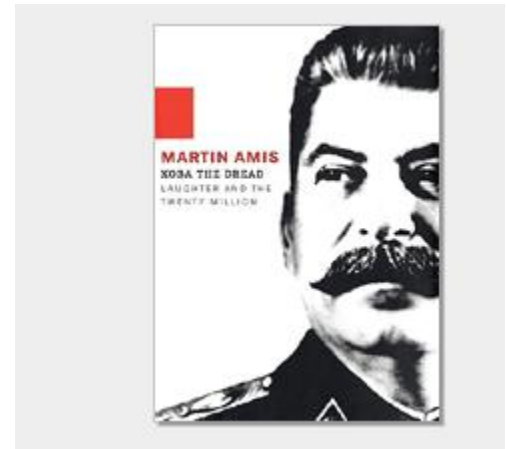
"Koba the Dread," by Martin Amis

Martin Amis calls out Christopher Hitchens and other friends on the left for not giving full weight to the 20 milli of Stalin's terror.

By Charles Taylor

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July 16, 2002 | The left's romance with Stalinism ended decisively 30 years ago with the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's "The Gulag Archipelago." For the true believers, things have only gotten worse. The onset of glasnost in the '80s saw the release of official documents that not only confirmed but exceeded the numbers of dead the historian Robert Conquest had claimed in his 1968 book "The Great Terror." When Conquest set about preparing a new edition of the book using those documents (it appeared 1990 as "The Great Terror: A Reassessment"), his publisher asked whether he thought the new title would be appropriate. "How about, 'I Told You So, You Fucking Fools'?" Conquest responded.



For Martin Amis, in his new book "Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million" the fools were people like the philosopher A.J. Ayer, whom Amis recalls in conversation with Amis' father, Kingsley Amis:

"In the USSR," Ayer argued, "at least they're trying to forge something positive."

"But it doesn't matter they're trying to forge, because they've already killed 5 million people," Amis said.

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"You keep going back to that 5 million," Ayer complained, unconsciously echoing the idea that one person was tragic, the death of a million "a statistic."

Stalin was shrewd enough to grasp the limits of a sane person's credulity. The stories -- like those told in "The Great Terror," in the historian Catherine Merridale's recent *Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia* and in Eugenia Semenovna Ginzburg's 1966 memoir of 18 years in Stalin's prisons and labor camps -- are, in the truest sense, deliberately forced into famine so bad (in 1932 and '33) that parents ate their children's bodies were stacked in the streets, only to be frozen in the Russian winter whose snow melted into infected water that ran through the streets and killed even more. A 1937 census uncovered statistical proof of those who had died and therefore caused the census to be the stuff of fiction, it would be pulp horror or the most callous absurdism.

Despite the fact that it can be plausibly argued that true communism has never been tried, that every state that has attempted it has perpetrated totalitarian outrages. In the end, among all the variations on the theme are less striking than the similarities of the lives lived under those regimes. More unites than separates voices like Josef Skvorecky in Czechoslovakia, Peter Schneider in Germany, Reinaldo Arenas in Cuba and the CBS documentary "The Gate of Heavenly Peace."

"Koba the Dread" is an adumbration of the incidents that Amis has gleaned from the Soviet experiment." Woven through the book are his own experiences in the arguments conducted with his father (a communist for 15 years before becoming an atheist) and with his friend Christopher Hitchens. It encompasses his friendship with Robert Kennedy (since he was a child).

Amis' tone doesn't match the earned belligerence you find in Conquest's revised *The Great Terror*. His prose gives off a sense of appalled wonder. Underneath the steady stream of horror stories, Amis is asking how anyone in his or her right mind can still consider the communist world just world; how people (like his pal Hitchens) can joke about their communist past that someone who joked about his fascist past would; how the apologists for Stalin can ignore evidence as to the truth of Soviet Russia before glasnost, can be thought of any dif

Part of the answer, of course, is that the public face of anti-communism has been McCarthy or the John Birch Society. For many of us on the left, anti-communism was the right that it became an ideological taint to avoid. Who, for instance, would want to be when that meant finding oneself on the same side as Richard Nixon? But neither the case of the Rosenbergs (who were, of course, guilty) is an adequate excuse for denying the Great Leap Forward, or -- on a lesser scale -- Castro's persecution of homosexuals. The catastrophic failure of Castro's revolution has increasingly become the subject of Jos Latour's "Outcast" and Daniel Chavarra's wonderful "Adios Muchachos.")

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