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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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The subtitle of Amis' book is "Laughter and the Twenty Million." The query that runs through the book, never fully answered, is how is it that we can laugh at Bolshevism not at Nazism? That premise isn't entirely sound. Though their crimes weren't funny, Nazis lent themselves to ridicule, being humorless, dogmatic and possessing accents that could easily be adapted for comic effect. And Jewish writers and comics have made the Holocaust as the latest episode in the endless, cosmic suffering of Jews. Perhaps only a Jew could have come up with Mel Brooks' peerless definition of the difference between comedy and tragedy: "Tragedy is I cut my finger. Comedy is if you fall into an open manhole and die." (A friend who has many family members who died in the Holocaust and some who survived had among the latter an uncle who, faced with something that could cut a finger or a hangnail, would exclaim, "First the Holocaust, and now this!")

"It seems," writes Amis, "that the Twenty Million will never command the sepulchral decorum of the Holocaust ... It would not be so unless something in the nature of Bolshevism allowed it to be so." I'd like to suggest that this has something to do with the inversions exemplified by Orwell's slogans, the total annihilation of meaning, of the ability to define which side you are on.

The black humor of the terror is present throughout "Journey Into the Whirlwind" and the absurdity reserved for true believers betrayed. Ginzburg is not the only inmate of Stalin's prisons who, at first, can't help but believe that her fate is a mistake that will be rectified by the party. Another prisoner even attempts to get her to give up the names of all those she knows who oppose Stalin, reasoning that the more names the party possesses of people who are against Stalin, the quicker the party will be to realize these good, loyal communists can't be wrong. (Ginzburg refuses.) At one point Ginzburg is told by a fellow inmate that she was right not to answer some questions from ot

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inmates because "Who knows which of them is really an enemy, and which are the and me?" It would, as Oscar Wilde said, take a heart of stone not to laugh.

It would be false optimism to detect any hope in that sort of laughter. But perhaps that, even in Stalin's Russia, there was the possibility of some sort of truth-telling, what Amis is trying to do in "Koba the Dread" is to clear the mental decks, to synt to tell us about the reality of a major episode of 20th century history and to disdai or explain it away. That he does not consider himself especially political may be w firm), why he's without either the guilt or the fury that ex-believers feel in having : deceived. Amis is asking if we can finally talk about this as logical, sensible, moral

You could fill books with the literary friendships that have broken up over argume that Amis' friendship with Christopher "Lenin was ... a great man" Hitchens is on book is a long open letter to "Comrade Hitchens" in which Amis writes, "So it is st wouldn't want to put more distance between yourself and these events than you d and your unregretted discipleship of Trotsky ... Why? An admiration for Lenin an an admiration for terror. They would not want your admiration if it failed to inclu you admire terror? I know you admire freedom."

The letter is not without affection. But it is also very sly, Amis having chosen to ai friend in public. No doubt Hitchens' hatchet job lamenting his friend's inadequate horrors of capitalism, ad nauseam, is still to come. But the question Amis asks hir not easily ducked. And it's the question that Amis is asking of all the apologists, al

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