

I was a teenage revolutionary

Scott Hargreaves reviews

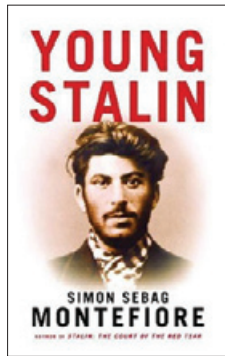
Young Stalin

by Simon Sebag Montefiore
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson,
2007, 496 pages)

Young Stalin is in the best Hollywood tradition of the prequel. Written after the highly rated and popular work on Stalin, *The Court of the Red Tsar*, *Young Stalin* delves into his early life as a son, student, poet, radical, husband, gangster, and conspiracist. Also in the Hollywood tradition, the author, Simon Montefiore, has the capacity to weave a gripping narrative out of what could have been dry archival material. His literary skills are put to good service as he brings to life Stalin's early milieu of Tsarist Georgia, an incredibly violent, drunken, booming, romantic cross-roads of multiple ethnicities and ideologies.

The prequel is perhaps the more important of the two as an historical work: Stalin's time in power is necessarily well-covered by histories and biographies, but before the publication of *Young Stalin*, there had only been two or three biographies of his early life. With so many Tsarist archives and personal journals only becoming available since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Montefiore has shed new light on Stalin's early life and made explicable his rise to the top. We also better understand the well-springs of his later record as revolutionary, mass-murderer, and paranoid tyrant.

Until this book came along Stalin's history has been written by the losers. While Stalin won the battle to succeed Lenin as leader of the Soviet Union, he was portrayed by the exiled Leon Trotsky and his followers as a grey bureaucrat who had been engaged in clerical



duties during the revolution. His rise, they said, represented a betrayal of the cause of lighting the globe in a blaze of 'permanent revolution', and a victory for the administrative state. Orwell, echoing this, portrays Big Brother as a generic despot of a totalitarian, but not necessarily communist, dystopia.

Stalin responded to Trotsky in characteristic fashion—arranging for an ice-pick to be plunged into his skull. But ever since then, radical and left-green movements around the world have continued the fiction that the murderousness of the Soviet regime was somehow an idiosyncratic outcome of Stalin's personality, rather than an inevitable outcome of the seizure of power by a self-appointed 'vanguard of the proletariat'. As Edmund Burke had pointed out, a revolution born in blood brings forth the most ruthless of the revolutionaries, and Stalin was certainly that. The picture that emerges from this biography is not that of a glorified clerk, but rather a highly-intelligent, driven, erudite and altogether riveting personality entirely capable of suborning the Bolsheviks and the Soviet state to his will.

Stalin was born Josef Vissarionovich Djugashvili on 6 December 1878, the year in which Tsarist Russia completed the conquest of the last corner of Georgia to resist conquest and assimilation. His father, known as Beso, was a cobbler with his own workshop and staff, and in the mostly poor township of Gori the family was considered moderately prosperous. Only later did Beso's worsening alcoholism lead to the destruction of

the business and his estrangement from his family. The life of young Josef—or 'Soso' as he was mostly known—was dominated by his mother, 'Keke', who adored, beat, supported and drove her son so that he could achieve her undying dream of him becoming a priest.

The great pastime of schoolboys and youths in Gori in those days was bareknuckle streetfighting. Young Soso was an enthusiastic participant—even permanent damage to his arm from an earlier mishap, and his relative lack of size, were not enough to keep him from the fray. The reports gathered by Montefiore are of a youth typically Georgian in his pastimes, but already displaying a magnetic personality, a disdain for authority, and an ability to recruit others to serve in his battles.

The turning point in his life came when his remarkable mother cajoled, begged and borrowed from enough supporters to ensure her son a half-scholarship and sufficient supplementary funds to attend Seminary in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, the only hope for the further education of Soso. There he wrote poetry, read voraciously and excelled academically, all the while clashing with the repressive school authorities. It surely becomes more difficult for left-wing intellectuals to dismiss Stalin as a mere 'thug', when his reading habits included Hugo, Zola, Schiller, Maupassant, Balzac, Russian and French history, Marx of course, and Plato in the original Greek. A particular favourite novel told of a Georgian bandit-hero called 'Koba', a name he adopted as the first of his many pseudonyms. Even before finishing school he was attending meetings of the local radical and workers movements. After leaving school he was working as a meteorologist, of all things, when he was first marked for arrest by the Tsar's secret police. Ever alert, he spotted the plain clothes police, and escaped, but thereafter never again held gainful employment outside the revolutionary movement.

He was frequently dismissed and

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Opposite: Stalin in exile, 1915

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derided in that movement by its leaders, who couldn't see past the pockmarks, the withered arm, the eccentric Georgian clothes and his general air of gangsterism. He was that, but much more. In the early years of the twentieth century he gravitated to Lenin's faction and this is where his skills for organisation and violence came to the fore.

While the movement was officially non-violent, Soso raised cash with daring robberies, extortion rackets, and smuggling. His daylight raid of a Tsarist payroll delivery in Tbilisi in 1907, complete with massive explosions, terror, and death, raised the then phenomenal sum of 250,000 roubles, nearly \$3.4 million in today's money. Lenin, in exile, fighting for leadership of the anti-Tsarist forces, officially distanced himself from the terrorism while fighting off his rivals to secure the cash.

Over the next decade Soso rose in influence within the revolutionary movement, mainly, but never entirely, aligned with Lenin. Soso travelled in and out of Russia to attend meetings with Lenin and others, including one notable visit to London. He was also in and out of jail, and served stints of varying severity in Siberian exile. Montefiore, drawing on his researches in the archives of the Tsarist secret police, the Okhrana, shows just how much they knew about the revolutionaries, but also how much the state maintained the formalities of justice and more or less European notions of punishment. Sentences might be for only a few years, and escapes from exile were both frequent and not greatly punished if the prisoner was caught again.

For all the repressiveness of the Tsarist state, the first Red Terror after the revolution executed more people in eighteen months than in the entire history of Tsarist Russia. Nevertheless, the Okhrana was quite competent in its in-

telligence gathering and use of double-agents and Soso's life-long paranoia was well-founded. It was during this time he began the practice of purging his terrorist cells and executing suspected collaborators. The great and murderous purges of party, state and people that he carried out in office were therefore entirely consistent with the pitiless and paranoid mental framework he developed during his time in the revolutionary demi-monde.

We also learn the remarkable story of Stalin's marriages, affairs, and cast-off children. Montefiore even interviewed a 109-year-old Georgian who remembered Stalin's first wife, Kato Svanidze. Soso was passionate about Kato, but when he dragged her to the oil boomtown and radical hotbed of Baku, his neglect and the polluted environment led to her early and difficult death from disease. Her relatives never forgave him, and he later said that something of himself died with her. The son he left with relatives to raise was not the last child he was to abandon.

Soso attracted women, particularly intelligent and/or radical women, with his poetry, singing, humour, romantic gestures and dashing figure. If they were married to other men, it did not matter.

As he aged—and perhaps as his heart and intellectual arteries hardened ever more—he was driven to pursue younger and younger women. During his last and most difficult exile in the far north of Siberia, Soso 'seduced and impregnated' a thirteen-year-old by the name of Lidia Perprygina. Even by the standards of a remote and backward village this was seen as outrageous, and when discovered *in flagrante delicto* he was chased out of the house by a sabrewielding policeman. He took up with his last wife, Nadya Alliluyeva, when she was sixteen.

Soso took up Stalin ('Man of Steel') as a revolutionary code-name only in 1912. By the time he returned from exile to the revolutionary hot-bed of St Petersburg in 1917 he was a member of the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks, but not necessarily visible as one of its leading lights. Having spent nearly two decades underground, he had no public profile and was unprepared for the somewhat democratic public space which opened up after the abdication of the Tsar. This made Trotsky's subsequent version of events more easily believable, but Montefiore provides evidence that when Lenin wanted something done, only Trotsky and Stalin would be considered. All three were dismissive of the dithering of their more cautious and softer-hearted colleagues, and believed absolutely in violence as the indispensable tool for transforming society. In this way the author also helps dispel the myth that Lenin was, as Manning Clark put it, 'Christ-like... in his compassion'. Rather than betraying the legacy, Stalin in power was continuing the policies of class genocide and the use of terror as a tool of social engineering put in place by Lenin.

It is profoundly disturbing and perhaps dangerous to get as close to the mind of a tyrant as we do by reading this book, especially when the quality of the writing keeps us hooked. In any other circumstance it would be hard not to admire the daring, erudition, and occasional charm of the Georgian warrior-poet it describes. But in this remarkable work Montefiore has given us the complete picture, and fascination is admixed with revulsion.

At a time when the Russian state begins to see once again criticism of Stalin as unpatriotic, this book is almost essential reading.

