

A basket weaver himself, like the weaver in his poem “The Basket Weaver’s Dream,” Wilmer Mills has written poems whose words and music take the reader forward,

yet also back, along time’s mysterious road through many of the joys and sorrows and unanswered questions of this life toward “a breeze in the trees of Eden.” †

- 1 David Middleton, “Singing the Pieces Back in Place: The Life and Verse of Wilmer Hastings Mills (1969–2011),” *Modern Age* 55, nos. 1 and 2, Winter/Spring 2013, 111–19.
- 2 Ibid., 118–19.
- 3 Jeff Hardin, “A Gift for Adoration: Celebrating the Life and Words of Poet Wilmer Mills,” <http://www.chapter16.org/print/1630>.
- 4 Wilmer Mills, “Living in Eternity,” June 8, 2011, <http://www.chapter16.org/print/1516>.

LENIN’S FAITHFUL HEIR

Daniel J. Mahoney

Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator

By Oleg V. Khlevniuk

Translated by Nora Seligman Favorov

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This is not the first biography of Stalin nor will it be the last. Stalin fascinates not least because he embodied that moment when ideological fanaticism came together seamlessly with despotism of a personal sort. He was a dictator, a Leader or *Vozhd*, but his dictatorship is unthinkable without the underlying Marxist-Leninist project to create a new man in a new society. As the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski argued in an impressive series of writings, Stalinism is best understood not as a betrayal of Marxist-Leninism but as one of its possible outcomes. Lenin built the infrastructure of

a totalitarian society and declared war on enemies real and imagined. He employed political repression on a massive scale and ruthlessly repressed peasant uprisings and any independent display of religious sentiment or observance. He built a political order rooted in mendacity and dedicated to an ideological Manicheism that excoriated opponents of Bolshevism (the vast majority of the Russian people) as enemies of the human race. Is it so surprising that his successor parlayed this legacy into full-scale totalitarianism, that Marxist-Leninism became Marxist-Leninist-Stalinism?

The distinguished Russian historian Oleg V. Khlevniuk fully appreciates the Leninist or ideological dimensions of Stalin’s dictatorship. He shows that “ideological doctrines and prejudices were often decisive in Stalin’s life and actions.” This indisputable

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truth is often ignored or dismissed by those who want to blame Soviet tyranny exclusively on Stalin's personal characteristics. As Khlevniuk shows, Stalin read widely, mainly in the Marxist-Leninist classics and other revolutionary literature (there were four hundred books that he carefully notated over the years). But he did not receive this ideological legacy passively. His personality also helped forge the political course that he followed from the early 1920s—when power began to pass into his hands—until his death on March 5, 1953.

He was “cruel by temperament and devoid of compassion,” character traits that reinforced the “theoretical dogmatism” that “lay at the root of the violence that defined his regime.” Marxism was always blind to good and evil in the human soul, and communists had to come up with the most un-Marxist explanations to explain Stalin's alleged corruption of a more pristine and ideologically pure Leninism. Perhaps other Soviet leaders might have been less stubborn and more flexible and a little more humane, but all rejected constitutional constraints on power *in principle* and endorsed terror as a legitimate instrument of class struggle. All mocked any notion of a higher moral law. Stalin could perceive himself as a faithful heir to Lenin without fundamentally distorting the ideological foundations of the Soviet state or the historical truth.

Stalin, to be sure, greatly amplified state repression, and his version of “class war gave the Terror the breadth and brutality of an actual war.” Khlevniuk rightly notes that “the Soviet dictator has earned the distinction of being the organizer and director of one of the most powerful and merciless terror machines known to history.” Yet it is important not to turn Stalin into a mere caricature—a symbol of pure evil, even if he was an evildoer on a massive scale. This excellent biography shows

that he was a man of some capacity who “deserved his standing and reputation as a prominent Bolshevik.” He had considerable writing and organizational abilities, as well as daring, decisiveness, and a single-minded devotion to Lenin (despite conflicts that would emerge between the two men in the first years of Bolshevik rule). Half of Stalin's life was lived in the years before the Soviet Revolution, and twenty of those years were spent tirelessly promoting the revolutionary cause. And while he was cruel and merciless, there is no evidence to suggest he was mad in the clinical, as opposed to moral, sense of the term.

One of the great merits of Khlevniuk's biography, rooted as it is in minute attentiveness to archival sources, is that it demolishes the argument of certain “revisionists” that Stalinist terror was an ad hoc affair, decentralized and with many local initiatives. Khlevniuk makes clear that the archives provide no support whatsoever for “the idea of a ‘weak dictator.’” All decisions of major consequence were made by Stalin and Stalin alone. He never ceased to exercise dictatorial control. He was the mastermind behind collectivization and the massive dislocations and deaths that followed. The Terror of 1937 and 1938 was conducted under his watchful eye. He had “a firm grip on power and the implementation of key decisions.” Repression and purges kept the governmental and party apparatus “in a state of mobilized tension” and thus easy prey for Stalin's terror machine. It is ludicrous to find authentic pluralism—and countervailing centers of power—operating in the Soviet Union under Stalin (or even in the post-Stalinist years, for that matter).

Khlevniuk provides a useful and accurate précis of the scale and scope of violence under Lenin and Stalin. Eight million died in the Russian civil war. Five million died of fam-

ine in the early 1920s as a result of the civil war and the draconian policies of War Communism introduced and implemented by Lenin (he would reluctantly retreat from this display of egregious ideological fanaticism by introducing the more market-friendly New Economic Policy in 1921). Whole peoples such as the Don Cossacks were subjected to what can only be called genocide.

But the Soviet state took truly murderous aim at the remnants of civil society only in the years after 1930. It became totalitarian not only in aspiration but in reality. There were no more of the half measures and equivocations of the mid-to-late 1920s. Eight hundred thousand people were shot between 1930 and 1952. Millions more were tortured to death or died in labor camps that were often indistinguishable from death camps. Twenty-six million people “were sentenced to incarceration in labor camps, penal colonies or prisons” or were sent into “administrative exile” in remote areas of the USSR. Khlevniuk’s summation is both damning and revealing: “On average, over the more than twenty-year span of Stalin’s rule, 1 million people were shot, incarcerated, or deported to barely habitable areas of the Soviet Union every year.”

Millions were arrested for being late for work or for “economic crimes” that would not exist in a minimally decent or free society. And during the “Great Patriotic War,” millions perished or were punished for retreating from the advancing German army. Those who survived were used as cannon fodder by a completely unscrupulous *Vozhd*. His refusal to listen to the judgment of local commanders meant that whole armies were surrounded and decimated by the Germans in the early months of the war. Stalin’s systematic assault on the officer corps during the Great Terror left the Red Army unprepared for battle. And his illu-

sions about Hitler’s fidelity to his word made Operation Barbarossa even more devastating than it had to be. Stalin does not deserve the encomiums he still receives in Russia—and sometimes abroad—for leading the USSR to victory in the Second World War. Twenty-seven million Soviet citizens perished during the war in no small part because of Stalin’s errors of judgment and because of the fact that he had no concern for the value of human life.

To all these deaths one must add the victims of “periodic famines or starvation.” Five to seven million alone perished in 1932 and 1933 in southern Russia, the north Caucasus, and the Ukraine (this was a war against the independent peasantry—a democide if you will—and not an ethnic genocide). Another million or two starved to death in 1946 and 1947. These Stalinist famines were the result of political decisions, and the Stalinist regime did nothing to alleviate the fate of the Russian and Ukrainian peasantry. Grain was expropriated from the dying, and no grain was purchased abroad. All this occurred during relatively good weather, and with no conflict or war, other than the self-conscious war against the independent peasantry unleashed in 1929 and 1930.

Khlevniuk’s use of the word *war* is by no means hyperbolic. Stalin despised economic incentives and humane techniques of labor management. He wanted to turn the peasantry into “slaves of the state.” He “favored the total expropriation of peasant property” and waged a ruthless and uncompromising military campaign against the Russian village and peasant way of life. Peasants did their best to resist, and hundreds of thousands of “kulak” families (an ideologically derogatory term for the hardest working and most successful farmers) were sent to camps or into exile. “Agriculturally rich regions were ruined and desolated,” and those who

did not die of hunger were often left disabled. One should not underestimate the centrality of collectivization to Soviet despotism: it was ideologically motivated and “was the cornerstone of Stalin’s dictatorship.” A pragmatic state leader, uninformed by ideological fanaticism, as well as a crude sense of class struggle, would not have declared systematic war on the best of his people.

Khlevniuk has much to say about the Kirov assassination that set in motion the purge trials and the Great Terror of 1937 and 1938. There is no evidence that Stalin was behind the Leningrad party leader’s assassination, but he took advantage of the situation in Machiavellian (or should we say Leninist?) fashion to strike out at real and mainly imagined opposition. In a year and a half, 1.6 million people were arrested and 700,000 were shot.

The Great Terror consisted of two operations: one directed at “anti-Soviet elements” (including party officials) and the other at suspect nationalities. The Great Terror was savage and the secret police’s torture chambers knew no rest. It was orchestrated by Stalin from beginning to end. In good Machiavellian fashion, he even had his secret police chief Nikolai Yezhov arrested and executed and replaced him with the equally monstrous Lavrenty Beria. It should be noted that much commentary on Soviet repression privileges the Great Terror (its victims wrote memoirs and many were Bolsheviks). Khlevniuk is to be credited for giving equal time, so to speak, to the peasant victims of communism.

He could, however, have said much more about the systematic war on religion, especially Orthodoxy, in the 1920s and 30s. He highlights Stalin’s qualified turn to Russian patriotism (however coopted by Soviet ideology) during the Great Patriotic War and notes his loosening of restrictions on the Russian Orthodox Church. But like

many secular scholars, he does not give the war against religion the treatment it so richly deserves. Churches were closed in vast numbers, and so many believers and clergy perished. To understand the centrality of murderous atheism to the Bolshevik project, one needs to turn to Alexander Yakovlev’s searing treatment of this matter in *A Century of Violence in Soviet Russia* (Yale University Press, 2002).

It should be mentioned that this biography contains a fascinating book within the book: a riveting account of Stalin’s last days that is interwoven into the work as a whole. We see the palpable fear that animated the members of Stalin’s inner circle and how abject servitude would be intermittently replaced by contempt when they thought Stalin was truly near death. Khlevniuk believes that the “dictatorship” in the complete sense of the term came to an end shortly after Stalin’s death in March 1953. A party oligarchy replaced those elements of personal tyranny that were the hallmark of the Stalin era. There is some truth in this claim. Within a couple of years, the GULAG system was considerably reduced (although not eliminated), and the state security apparatus reformed.

But our author acknowledges that Leninist—and Stalinist—habits died hard in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. The world was still cruelly divided into friends and enemies, and ideological thinking (the ubiquitous emphasis on “class struggle” and “class categories”) predominated. And as Solzhenitsyn has powerfully chronicled, the ideological Lie persisted as a “form of existence,” distorting every aspect of life right up to the death throes of the Soviet regime. Its inhuman reign would not begin to come to an end until the Gorbachev years, and even then it held on for dear life. Khlevniuk is excellent on the place of institutional violence under the Stalinist regime

but less successful in conveying the human atmosphere of Soviet life; for that, I recommend the remarkable chapter “Our Muzzled Freedom” from volume two of Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* for a gripping description of how ideological despotism (and the fear generated by Stalinism) wreaked havoc on the souls of ordinary Soviet men and women. Betrayal and mendacity really did become what Solzhenitsyn calls “forms of existence.”

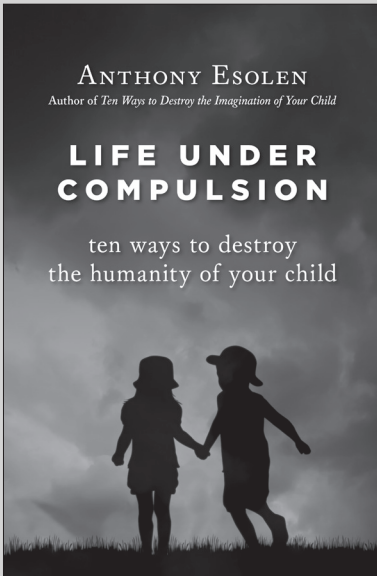
Khlevniuk’s archive-based approach, perfectly appropriate within its sphere, is less helpful for dealing with the soul of man under ideological despotism. But perhaps that is asking too much of our distinguished

historian. He has laid out for us crucial facts, *indisputable facts*, which will allow for fuller, and more exact, philosophical examination of twentieth century totalitarianism.

There is much that is new in this “new” biography of Stalin but also a great deal that confirms what discerning students of totalitarianism have known for a long time. In any case, this biography of Stalin—careful, painstakingly researched, immensely learned, and lucidly written—is most welcome indeed. And its Russian readers are rightly cautioned at the end of the book against misplaced nostalgia for a leader worthy only of disdain and condemnation. The path of Russian renewal surely lies elsewhere. †

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