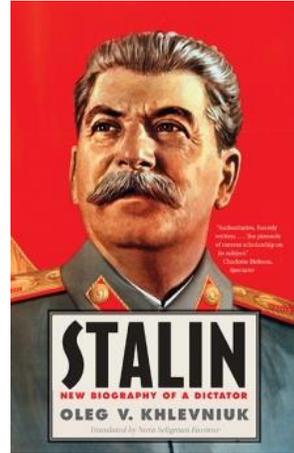


Oleg Khlevniuk. Translated by Nora Seligman Favorov. *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. xvi + 392. ISBN: 978-0-300-16388-9. Hardback \$24.99.

Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart wrote the following in his 2009 book *Atheist Delusions*:

We live now in the wake of the most monstrously violent century in human history, during which the secular order (on both the political right and the political left), freed from the authority of religion, showed itself willing to kill on an unprecedented scale and the with an ease of conscience worse than merely depraved. If ever an age deserved to be thought an age of darkness, it is surely ours. One might almost be tempted to conclude that secular government is the one form of government that has shown itself too violent, capricious, and unprincipled to be trusted.¹



How, then, can anyone today begin to come to grips with this terrifying reality? What would be the quickest way for busy Americans and others to get some kind of exposure to this nightmare called the twentieth century?

Perhaps by reading a lucid account of recent socialist experiments, like Richard Pipes' history of communism²—or better, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*.

Given its publisher (Yale) and the sheer number of conflicting biographies about Joseph Stalin, I was initially worried that this release might prove to be little more than an exercise in cloistered academic

¹ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 105-6.

² Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2003).

research—technical discussions, assuming lots of prior knowledge, correcting obscure scholars, etc. Fortunately, this proved not to be the case. Thanks to both the author and translator, *Stalin* is, despite its painstaking primary-source research, generally easy to read for those with little knowledge of Stalin or the Soviet Union. The work follows a loose chronological order of eight chapters with seven short interludes recounting the last few days of Stalin's life, which are equally interspersed throughout the main content. This unique format transports readers into a mesmerizing journey that stair-steps through Stalin's life—from birth to death—while constantly revisiting the tension surrounding his final agonizing hours.

The first chapter (“Before the Revolution”) briefly recounts some of the earliest years of Soso's (Joseph's) life. He was born successfully (after two previous miscarriages by his mother Ekaterina) into a humble Georgian family in 1878. The difficulties of his upbringing are not entirely clear. But both parents did physically abuse him, and his father drank heavily and eventually abandoned the family (pp. 12-13). Despite these conditions—and a permanent disability with his left arm—Ioseb and his mother worked hard and hoped for the best.

Against life's odds, Stalin entered a Christian high school (Gori Theological School) on track to become an Orthodox Priest. “He earned a grade of ‘excellent’ for behavior, as well as for Sacred History, Orthodox Catechism, Liturgical Exegesis and Ecclesiastical Typikon, Russian and Church Slavonic, Georgian, geography, penmanship, and liturgical chant” (p. 15). He graduated in 1884 and soon enrolled in Tiflis Theological Seminary with a partial stipend to offset expenses. But stresses in moving to the big city (Georgia's capital), the legalist environment of the seminary, and boredom in the classroom led Stalin searching for something more hands-on and relevant. The book-raids (secular literature was forbidden on campus) and other power-plays by the seminary administration created considerable resentment by the student body, and by early 1897, Stalin was taking part in an underground book club, lost interest in class,

and saw himself as a budding political revolutionary. Above all, he was consumed with the all-encompassing narrative of Marxism, and he saw that he had an important part to play in its realization (p. 18).

The administration decided to expel Stalin before graduating—but gave him a certificate of completion anyway. Now free of oppression from the seminary, he combated the oppression of the Russian Empire. From around 1899 to 1902, Stalin indulged in radical, political revolutionary activity—something he proved to be good at. “He had just the right balance of decisiveness and caution, obsession and cynicism, to emerge unscathed through the revolution’s countless dangers” (p. 22). But all this “success” would come at tremendous costs to him and to others.

After being arrested for revolutionary activity in 1901, he was sent into exile to northern Siberia in 1903, but escaped a year later. Through several more years of hustle-and-bustle rebellion, he married Yaketerina in 1906 and began working with Lenin. Less than two years later, his wife died of illness. He was arrested again in 1910 and released a year later. Back on the saddle with more determination than ever, “He engaged in underground work in Russia, assisted in the publication of Bolshevik newspapers, wrote articles, and strategized with Bolshevik representatives in the State Duma. He also became one of Lenin’s closest associates” (p. 28). But he was once again caught, and in 1913 sent into Siberian exile.

This time, he didn’t escape, and wasn’t released until about four years later. The conditions were hellish. Sick, malnourished, and freezing, Stalin nearly died. He struggled to obtain basic resources and negotiate a release, but he was stuck in a dirty house in a town of less than 80 people, about a hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle, [and/where he was] forced to fish for white salmon. The thirty-five year-old managed, however, to move in with a family of orphans and sleep with a fourteen year-old girl, causing a fistfight between him and his guard (p. 30). Overtime, the local police (for various reasons) came to favor Stalin, and he began to recover health and life. But his intellectual curiosity still waned: “And what is

there to do," he wrote Lenin, "when there is no or almost no serious books?" (p. 32). The North Pole was no place for a philosopher.

The Revolution of 1917 meant the end of Stalin's exile, the end of the monarchy, and the beginning of a new chapter in Russia's history. Political parties rushed to control seats of the newly established parliament, but soon enough the Bolsheviks created their own "Provisional Government," in which Stalin and Lenin took part. These competing gangs forged a civil war that plagued the country from 1918-1920. A staggering eight million perished.

Statistics cannot capture the pervasive misery, the numbing of human feelings, the destruction of any sense of right and wrong. Savage murders and mass terror became common place. The epidemic of savagery inevitably engulfed the Bolsheviks themselves. The Civil War shaped the new state and largely determined its trajectory. (p. 54)

These tumultuous years determined Stalin's trajectory as well. In 1919, two seeds were planted that sprouted into darkness: he married the teenage Nadezhda Alliluyeva (who would later commit suicide, affecting Stalin deeply) and was elected to the Politburo in 1919, "the body that remained at the center of power in Soviet Russia and the USSR for the next seventy years" (p. 54). The virtuous philosopher finally became a lawless bureaucrat.

His first task was to obtain grain for the starving troops. But, given the impossibility of controlling an economy without using violence, "This economic mission quickly turned into a military one" (p. 54). Stalin knew nothing about governmental administration, war, economics, diplomacy, or even politics. All he knew about was the two tools he picked up from that Pharisaic seminary: *force and fear*.

As economic controls failed, he didn't seek counsel and education as one might expect a responsible leader to do. Instead, he openly mocked the "specialists," professionals, and other educated, trained know-nothings (p. 55). But even that wasn't enough to vindicate his authority:

Stalin responded to the threat of defeat with a maneuver that would later become his political signature: a hunt for 'counterrevolutionary plots.'...A case was thrown together in a matter of days, culminating in execution and an announcement in the local newspaper. (p. 56)

Interestingly, when Stalin *did* achieve military or economic success (usually at random), he took full responsibility for it. This warped, "can't-be-wrong" mentality was reinforced by the socialist hierarchy of power and authority that requires it, and eventually a dictator of unstoppable destruction emerged.

The civil war ended, but it left millions to die in the famine of 1921-22. Over the next several years, Stalin consolidated power in the Politburo through factionalism, political intrigues, and fabricated charges. This section of the biography is a fast-paced narrative reminiscent of Speer's memoirs about Hitler's rise to power.³ Stalin sought to realize Marx's dream of abolishing private property through a system of land collectivization. This meant that land was confiscated and the peasantry became slaves.

As Stalin's opponents had warned, these measures yielded immediate but unsustainable results. The confiscations took away peasants' economic incentive and led to a drop in production. Each harvest was worse than the one before, leading the grain collectors to resort to increasingly ruthless methods...[In his new model, the] Kulaks [business owners] and their families were to be exiled to remote areas of the USSR, arrested, placed in camps, or shot...[he believed that] a moneyless form of socialism based on the exchange of goods was right around the corner. (pp. 111-12)

This process required a massive amount of resources and labor just to enforce—and it also incentivized violence. "The plundering of

³ See Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

‘dekulakized’ property and the raping of women were standard. Churches were closed and clergy members arrested” (p. 113). Having their property taken away and beginning to starve, a wave of rural revolts occurred from 1926-27. Over three million peasants revolted by 1930, many fighting with stakes (being otherwise unarmed) to prevent arrests. But with a monopoly of power firmly in place, there was no hope.

The soviet village, ravaged by collectivization, was seriously degraded. Agricultural production plummeted, and the livestock sector was hit hard. Between 1928 and 1933, the number of horses dropped from 32 million to 17 million, heads of cattle fell from 60 million to 33 million and pigs from 22 million to 10 million. (p. 116)

From 1932-33, around seven million people died (and millions more disabled/malnourished) in “The Great Famine.” There was no chapter or verse of Marx (whose portrait hung beside Lenin in Stalin’s office) that would overcome the primeval desire to eat. Eventually, millions risked their lives by committing a heinous crime: consuming food that one produced instead of handing it over to the state.

All food supplies were taken away from the starving peasants—not only grain, but also vegetables, meat, and dairy products. Teams of marauders, made up of local officials and activists from the cities, hunted down hidden supplies—so-called *yamas* (holes in the ground), where peasants, in accordance with age-old tradition, kept grain as a sort of insurance against famine. Hungry peasants were tortured to reveal these *yamas* and other food stores, their families’ only safeguard against death. They were beaten, forced out into sub-freezing temperatures without clothing, arrested, or exiled to Siberia...Refugees were forced to return to their villages, doomed to slowly perish, or be arrested. By mid-1933, 2.5 million people were in labor camps, prisons, or exile. Many of them fared better than those who starved to death ‘in freedom.’...Secret OGPU and party summaries (*svodkas*), especially during the months of 1933, are filled with accounts of widespread cannibalism. Mothers murdered their

children, and deranged activists robbed and tormented the population (p. 118-119).

Nadezhda had enough of this socialist utopia and ended her life in 1932. Countless friends and family members wrote to Stalin for help. Some of his own officials wrote letters describing these unprecedented horrors. But in such an atheistic, hierarchical regime, the state was essentially divine, so there was no higher source of truth, law, or authority by which to abide by. In fact, during these desperate times, the General Secretary of the government happily announced the *success* of collectivization: “the vast masses of the poor...have attained material security...It is an achievement such as has never been known in the world before, such as no other state in the world has yet made” (p. 120).

Faced with total collapse, Stalin nevertheless had to bend. In the next two years he introduced economic and industrial reforms that allowed peasants to farm their own small plot of land and allowed cash to enter the marketplace once again. These simple concessions were enough to save millions of lives from further starvation. But it would be a mistake to think that Stalin’s mind had changed.

New concerns loomed over the dysfunctional Soviet Union. Hitler started taking over Europe, Japan later invaded China, and war seemed inevitable. Stalin became more and more paranoid. He began a series of internal purges, torturing and killing many of his own officials. Eventually this purge expanded beyond the confines of the Politburo and into the ranks of ordinary citizens.

Over the roughly year-and-a-half duration of the Great Terror approximately 1,500 “enemies” were killed every day...Scholars have debated Stalin’s motives for years. The horrific nature of his deeds has led some to think he might have been insane...[Transcripts of speeches] are filled with references to conspiracies and omnipresent enemies. (p. 151)

He not only ordered the arrest and execution of hundreds of thousands of people, but he also took a strong interest in the details....He personally participated in interrogations and issued orders to apply torture. (p. 159)

What could the people do? "Write a letter to Congress"? It seemed better than nothing:

In January 1937 alone, 13,000 complaints were filed with the procuracy, and in February-March 1938 the number reached 120,000....What was Stalin's reaction to the suffering of his own fellow citizens? The historical record gives no clear answer to this question. But there is no evidence that he felt the slightest remorse or pity. (p. 161)

Khlevniuk then recounts the various geopolitical moves of Stalin in WWII, the Korean War, his meeting with Mao, and other key events of his administration.

There is so much more fascinating information and subtle angles of Stalin's personal life that it seems horribly unfair to end this review now, but we must.

There is perhaps no better way to peer through a window into the past than to read a well-written biography. With the shocking resurgence of Marxism and socialism in contemporary culture (and its galvanizing claims that "no previous government got it right—but *we will this time*"), shameless ignorance about the most bloody century in the history of the world, and a still-modern society that promises a utopia through centralized coercion, Khlevniuk's *Stalin* is not a volume to casually pass over.⁴ It has my highest recommendation. Buy ten and give them away to anyone who might read them. Like pouring through *The Brothers*

⁴ His final words are noteworthy: "How great is the danger that a blend of historical ignorance, bitterness, and social discontent will provide fertile ground for pro-Stalinist lies and distortions to take root? Could it really be that Russia in the twenty-first century is in danger of repeating the mistakes of the twentieth?" (p. 330).

Karamazov or Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* for the first time, you will not finish this work the same person.

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