YOUNG STALIN

by Simon Sebag Montefiore

reviewed by Orlando Figes

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'Stalin,' recalls the Menshevik politician Nikolai Sukhanov in his winning memoirs of the Russian Revoluion of 1917, 'gave me the impression…of a grey blur which flickered obscurely and left no trace. There is really nothing more to be said about him.'[1] Thanks to the writings of his more intellectual enemies, who deeply influenced the Western historiography of the early Soviet regime, we have come to see the young Stalin as a mediocrity, one of Lenin's loyal henchmen, who emerged from the darkest shadows of his party to seize power in the Soviet Union. Nobody did more to shape this view than Leon Trotsky, Stalin's arch-rival, whose *History of the Russian Revolution*, written in exile between 1929 and 1932, captured the imagination of the reading public in the West through its brilliant prose style. Regarding himself as Lenin's natural heir, Trotsky portrayed his nemesis as an intellectual non-entity who had cleverly manoeuvred himself into power through the manipulation of the Party's proletarian elements for which he stood. In *My Life*, in 1930, Trotsky wrote of Stalin at the time of Lenin's death in 1924:

> He is gifted with practicality, a strong will, and persistence in carrying out his aims. His political horizon is restricted, his theoretical equipment primitive….His mind is

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stubbornly empirical and devoid of creative imagination. To the leading group of the party (in the wider circles he was not known at all) he always seemed a man destined to play second and third fiddle.[2]

As Isaac Deutscher once remarked, Trotsky's view of Stalin 'as villain *ex machina*' is by far the least convincing aspect of *My Life*. It is hard to see, he wrote, how such an 'insignificant' figure could have been a serious antagonist to Trotsky, let alone how Stalin could have come 'to dominate the stage of the Soviet state and of international communism for full three decades.'[3] In fact Lenin in his Testament had described Stalin as one of 'the two most able men of the Central Committee', and, as Simon Sebag Montefiore demonstrates in this revealing new biography, only Lenin really knew how much his Party owed to the 'dirty business' [168] done by Stalin before 1917.

The literature on Stalin's early years is relatively small - certainly compared to the industry of books on young Hitler - although there is a superb book in Russian by Alexander Ostrovsky which draws from the newly opened archives and gives a solid base to Montefiore's work.[4] Stalin spent most of these years in the revolutionary underground, living on the run, in and out exile, in various cities of the Caucasus, northern Russia and Siberia, and he had a staggering forty different names, nicknames, bylines and aliases at various times, so his biographer is in for a long shift of detective work in the archives. In this respect, Montefiore is in a class of his own. As he did for his earlier book, *Stalin: The*

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2 Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 527-8.

3 Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast. Trotsky: 1929-1940* (Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 222.

4 *Kto stoial za spinoi Stalina?* (Moscow:OLMA, 2002).

*Court of the Red Tsar* (reviewed in the NYR, May 13, 2004), Montefiore has unearthed an unprecedented range of evidence from archives in Moscow and St Petersburg, Tbilisi, Gori, Batumi, Baku, Paris, London, Berlin and California, and he has tracked down an astonishing range of witnesses, from the relatives of Stalin's boyhood friends to his own aged relations, including the 109-year-old Mariam Svanidze, a relative of Stalin's first wife Kato, who still recalls her death in 1907.

*Young Stalin* is not without its weaknesses. Scholars may have reservations about its occasional lapses into semi-fictionalized narrative, while others will be driven mad by the endnotes, from which, in many cases, it is vitually impossible to find the sources for quotations in the text. But these are minor blemishes in this brilliantly researched book, which finally dispels the myth of the 'grey blur' and reveals the true face of the violent revolutionary, bank robber, gangster, singer, poet, womanizer, paedophile and ruthless murderer. The portrait of Stalin that emerges from these pages is more complete, more colourful, more chilling, and far more compelling than any we have had before.

Stalin was born Josef Djugashvili in the Georgian town of Gori in 1879. Thanks to the discovery of a memoir by his mother in the Georgian archives, Montefiore is able to provide a fuller picture of his early years. Stalin's father Beso was a relatively prosperous cobbler, employing several apprentices, but in 1889 his business failed. Beso took to the bottle and often beat his son, who rejected him in favour of a series of paternal figures, including a merchant and a priest, either one of whom may possibly have been his real father. Stalin suffered from smallpox as a boy which left his face badly marked. His left arm and both his legs were badly damaged in a carriage accident, leaving him with complexes about his body. His insecurities would have been exacerbated by the

macho culture of Georgia, in which Stalin had to fight in order to survive. Gori was a town where street battles were the main pastime. Little Stalin ('Soso') boxed and wrestled with success. The leader of a band of ruffians, he ran through the streets with his catapault and home-made bow terrorizing farmers and their cows.

Stalin's mother was ambitious for her son. Hoping he would become a bishop, she got him into the church school in Gori, and then into the famous Tiflis (Tbilisi) Seminary by persuading the same priest who was possibly her lover to register him as his son (tsarist seminaries and church schools were reserved the sons of priests). Montefiore rightly emphasizes the seminary's influence on the future dictator. 'Stalin owed his political success,' he argues, 'to his unusual combination of street brutality and classical education [39]. The Tiflis Seminary encouraged both. It was

> an institution that more resembled the most repressive nineteenth-century English public-school than a religious academy: the dormitories, the bullying boys, the rife buggery, the cruel sanctimonious teachers and the hours in the detention cells made it a Caucasian version of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* [45].

The Tiflis Seminary produced more atheists and revolutionaries than any of the Empire's other schools. Its monks 'were determined to squeeze any hint of Georgianness out of their proudly Georgian boys,' Montefiore writes. As a teenager, Stalin was a proud Georgian (when and how he moved away from these patriotic sentiments and embraced the Russian nationalism that would become such a feature of his dictatatorship remains unclear). A gifted singer, he was often hired to sing Georgian songs at weddings. He

revered the poems of the Georgian nationalist, Prince Raphael Eristavi, and knew his *Khevsur's Motherland* by heart. Stalin wrote his own romantic verses in emulation of Eristavi which were published in anthologies of Georgian poetry and widely known before anyone had heard of him as a revolutionary. One of Stalin's poems, written at the age of seventeen, tells the story of a lonely prophet betrayed by his own people. Cited by Montefiore in a translation by Donald Rayfield, it already gives a hint of the paranoic mindset of the future dictator:

> Over this land, like a ghost
> He roamed from door to door;
> In his hand he clutched a lute
> And sweetly made it tinkle;
> In his dreamy melodies,
> Like a beam of sunlight,
> You could sense truth itself
> And heavenly love.
> The voice made many a man's heart
> Beat, that had been turned to stone;
> It enlightened many a man's mind
> Which had been cast into uttermost darkness.
> But instead of glorification,
> Wherever the harp was plucked,
> The mob set before the outcast

A vessel filled with poison…

And they said to him: 'Drink this, o accursed,

This is your appointed lot!

We do not want your truth

Nor these heavenly tunes of yours!' [Part Four Opener]

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While still the seminary's finest choirboy, Stalin began to show an interest in the plight of the urban poor. 'At prayers,' Montefiore writes, 'the boys had the Bible open on their desks and read Marx or Plekhanov, the sage of Russian Marxism, on their knees' [57]. Stalin was inspired by Alexander Kazbegi's forbidden novel *The Patricide*, which told the story of a Caucasian bandit called Koba who fights against the Russians, sacrificing everything for his country, and then takes a terrible revenge against his enemies. Stalin adopted Koba as his revolutionary pseudonym. According to Montefiore,

> The name meant a lot to Stalin - the vengeance of the Caucasus mountain peoples, the ruthlessness of the bandit, the obsession with loyalty and betrayal, and the sacrifice of person and family for a cause [53].

Montefiore writes extremely well about the Caucasus, Tiflis in particular. He conjures up a world of goat farmers and small workshops, horses, mules and camels, sheepskin hats and fezzes, bazaars and brothels - a world suddenly and radically

transformed by the arrival of international capitalism (feeding off the oil-fields of Baku) and the expansion of the railways. Stalin found a ready audience for his simple revolutionary rhetoric in the mainly Russian workers' circles that sprang up in the workshops and railway depots of Tiflis.

In 1899, Stalin was expelled from the seminary - for Marxist propaganda, he later claimed, though Montefiore has found evidence to suggest that Stalin was involved in a sex scandal (he had got a girl pregnant) which the seminary covered up by expelling him, along with twenty others, for revolutionary activities. Stalin soon became the leader of a gang of expelled seminary boys (forty more were sent down in 1901). They ran protection rackets and controlled the streets in the workers' districts of Tiflis. Stalin was the main conspirator; his sidekick 'Kamo', Simon Ter-Petrossian, the first in a long succession of psychopathic killers who did Stalin's dirty work, the chief organizer of the gangs. After a demonstration by the Tiflis workers was put down by the police and Cossacks in 1901, Stalin fled to Batumi, a small town on the Georgian Back Sea coast turned into a major international port by the construction of an oil pipeline and refinery by the Rothschilds. Within three months of his arrival, the refinery had mysteriously caught fire, an act of arson almost certainly organized by Stalin (then employed in the refinery) to intimidate the Rothschilds, win a pay rise for the workers, and demand protection money from the oli barons, according to Montefiore, who cites evidence of Stalin's secret dealings with their management.

In 1902, Stalin was arrested, charged with organizing the disturbances in Batumi where 7,000 workers had clashed with mounted Cossacks, and imprisoned in the city's prison while he awaited sentencing.  He soon became the boss of the whole jail,

'dominating his friends, terrorizing the intellectuals, suborning the guards and befriending the criminals,' in Montefiore's words [88]. It was significant, and a sign of things to come, that Stalin, by his own admission, preferred the company of criminals to that of revolutionaries, 'because there were so many rats among the politicals' [89]. Stalin always had a loathing and mistrust of revolutionary intellectuals; he naturally suspected them of treachery, kept them at a distance from himself (or simply wiped them out), and relied instead on crimimals whose loyalty he could easily manipulate. 'In power,' Montefiore writes, Stalin 'shocked his comrades by promoting criminals in the NKVD [the political police], but he had used criminals all his life.' [175]

Exiled by the courts to Siberia, Stalin soon escaped with false papers and made his way back to Tiflis in time for the revolutionary events of 1905, when he made his first real contact with the Bolsheviks. Lenin valued Stalin as a gang leader who could raise cash for the hard-up Bolsheviks, most of whom were forced to flee abroad or go underground by police repressions after 1905. As Montefiore writes,

> Stalin became the effective godfather of a small but useful fundraising operation that really resembled a moderately successful Mafia family, conducting shakedowns, currency counterfeiting, extortion, bank-robberies, piracy and protection-rackets - as well as political agitation and journalism [168].

Stalin also organized the kidnapping of children and other relatives of wealthy businessmen, including probably the Baku oil baron Musa Nagayev, who was twice kidnapped for large ransoms, the first time when Stalin was living in Baku.

Stalin was certainly the mastermind of the spectacular attack carried out by Kamo and his gang on the State Bank in Tiflis in June 1907. Montefiore's book opens with an exciting set-piece description of the dramatic episode, in which the robbers gunned down guards and threw bombs under horse-drawn carriages, before running off with heavy bags of marked roubles worth approximately $3.4 million dollars in today's money - enough to fund the Bolsheviks for several years.

Eventually, in March 1908, the police tracked Stalin down. He was sentenced to exile in the Far North. But Stalin soon escaped again. For the next five years, he lived on the run, adopting various guises and killing anyone he suspected of betraying him to the police. Perhaps there was a connection between this hardening of Stalin and the death of his much-loved wife in 1907 (just as the suicide of his second wife, Nadezhda Allilueva, in 1932 appears to have unhinged him in the years before the Great Terror). In one of the book's most memorable scenes, Montefiore describes how the grieving Stalin threw himself into her grave. He cites him saying at the funeral to a friend that Kato had 'softened my heart of stone. She died and with her died my last warm feelings for humanity.' [166] Abandoning their son, for the next ten years Stalin led a life of total amorality and sexual promiscuity (not unusual among the revolutionaries, who thought they should be free of family or personal commitments to serve the Revolution properly). Stalin had a preference for 'malleable teenagers or buxom peasant women who would defer to him' [179], observes Montefiore. He fathered at least two illegitimate children, in neither of whom he ever showed the slightest interest.

The regularity with which Stalin was able to escape from penal exile (Montefiore reckons there were eight escapes from nine arrests and four short detentions [98]) has led

to speculation that he might have been an agent of the Tsar's police.[5] The revolutionary underground was riddled with informers and police spies, none more famous than Roman Malinovski, a member of the Bolshevik Party's Central Committee and one of its two deputies to the Duma parliament, who deceived Lenin until 1917. Montefiore persuasively rejects the accusations of treachery against Stalin, although he admits that he may have used connections in the police to get tip-offs about raids and possible informers (nor doubt in exchange for information about comrades he mistrusted and wanted removed by the police). Such horsetrading was common. The Caucasian police were notoriously venal. They regularly accepted bribes to release prisoners and the prices were well known. But no conclusive evidence has so far come to light that Stalin worked for the police. If Stalin managed to escape so easily from penal exile, it was probably because the Tsar's police were so inefficient and corrupt.

In fact, if anything, Stalin's position as a 'conciliator' (meaning that he favoured closer relations between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks) made him something of an irritant to the police, which tried to set the two wings of the Social Democratic Party against each other to keep them weak. Although Montefiore does not try to explain it, Stalin's conciliatory position no doubt had a lot to do with the practical necessity of cooperation with the Mensheviks in the revolutionary underground, especially in the provinces, where printing presses, ammunition stores, and other nuts and bolts of the revolution were hard to find. Montefiore does not have much time for Stalin's politics: his anti-hero is not a thinker but a thug. Stalin's most important publication, *Marxism and the*

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[5] See for example Edward Ellis Smith, *The Young Stalin: The Early Years of an Elusive Revolutionary* (New York, 1967); Roman Brackman, *The Secret File of Joseph Stalin: A Hidden Life* (London: Cass, 2001).

*National Question* (1913), by which he claimed his modest reputation as a theorist (and in which he first went by the byline of 'Stalin' in a major article), merits only a footnote, in which Montefiore gives a brief analysis of the pamphlet's centralizing principles. These were the principles by which Stalin, as the Soviet Commissar of Nationalities, would oversee the formation of the Soviet Union in 1923.

Stalin's line in *Marxism and the National Question* negated his earlier Georgian nationalism and even his position of 1905, when he had supported the idea of a Georgian Social Democratic Party separate from the Russian one. It is not clear at what point he had ceased to side with the Georgians, or how much of the Georgian 'Koba' remained within the Slavic 'Stalin' (a name that means in Russian something close to 'Man of Steel'). What is clear is that Lenin's ideological influence - his rigid centralism and hostility to separatist tendencies in any form - gradually supplanted Stalin's national identity. But Montefiore is also surely right that Stalin's last arrest and four years of exile in Siberia, between 1913 and 1917, 'made him more of a Russian' [259]. Forgotten by his comrades in St Petersburg, Stalin lived in a tiny hamlet on the Yenisei River, just beneath the Arctic Circle. He had an affair with a thirteen-year-old orphan girl, who bore him a son, and became a skilled hunter, shooting mainly foxes, reindeer and birds on expeditions with the local Tungus tribesmen. As Montefiore writes, the bleak Siberian winter and solitary existence of exile left their mark on the future dictator:

> Perhaps Siberia froze some of the Georgian exoticism out of him. He brought the self-reliance, vigilance, frigidity and solitude of the Siberian hunter with him to the Kremlin [259].

## 3

Stalin's conspiratorial style was not suited to the open politics of Russia's new democracy in 1917. After his return from Siberia, in March of that year, Stalin became an important figure behind the scenes of Soviet and party politics in revolutionary Petrograd (as St Petersburg had been renamed). He worked closely with Lenin in the Bolshevik Central Committee, edited the Party's newspaper *Pravda*, and represented the Bolsheviks in the Soviet executive. As Trotsky admitted, Stalin had 'the knack of convincing the average run of leaders, especially the provincials', [274] which would prove more powerful than Trotsky's brilliant public oratory once the Party imposed its dictatorship.

The real making of Stalin was the period of the Civil War (1918-1921) and the struggle over Lenin's legacy, following his death in 1924. Montefiore ends this volume in October 1917. After a short prologue, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* begins in 1932. A third Montefiore volume covering the intervening years would be a welcome addition, for many of the practices and attitudes which he has picked out from Stalin's years in the underground were to play a part in the dictator's rise to power after 1917.

During the Civil War Stalin took on a huge number of relatively mundane administrative jobs - he was the Commissar for Nationalities, the Commissar of Rabkrin (the Workers' and Peasant Inspectorate), a member of the Revolutionary Military Council, of the Politburo and the Orgburo, and the Chairman of the Party's Secretariat - with the result that he soon gained a reputation for modest and industrious mediocrity. All the Party leaders (and none less so than Lenin) made them same mistake of

underestimating Stalin's potential power, and his ambition to exercise it, as a result of the patronage he had accrued from holding all these posts. The key to Stalin's growing influence was his control of the party apparatus in the provinces. As the Chairman of the Secretariat, and the only Politburo member in the Orgburo, which controlled Party appointments, he could promote his friends and dismiss his opponents. In 1922, alone, the year when Stalin was made the first General Secretary of the Party, more than 10,000 provincial officials were appointed by the Orgburo and the Secretariat, most of them on Stalin's personal recommendation. They were to be his main supporters during the power struggle against Trotsky. Most of them, like Stalin, came from humble provincial backgrounds. Mistrustul of cosmopolitan (and Jewish-looking) intellectuals like Trotsky, they preferred to place their trust in Stalin's simple calls for 'proletarian unity' and 'Bolshevik discipline', when it came to matters of ideology.

Most of Stalin's closest political allies had been with him since the early days. Grigory ('Sergo') Ordzhonikidze (who would become Stalin's Commissar of Heavy Industry) was in Kamo's Tiflis gang. Klimenti Voroshilov (who would become his Defence Commissar) was one of Stalin's cronies from 1906. Andrei Vyshinsky (Stalin's Procurator in the Great Terror) was a member of his mafia-like Baku gang. V.M. Molotov, Stalin's longest-serving and most loyal henchman (who was, among other things, his Foreign Commissar), became acquainted with the future dictator in 1912. Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Bolshevik political police, was someone Stalin had befriended in 1917. Stalin was quick to recognize the revolutionary significance of the police. He had spent his whole political career dealing with the police, after all.

Stalin brought the clan-based and vendetta-ridden politics of the Caucasus into the Kremlin. He never forgot his enemies and used his power, not just to wipe them out, but to destroy their families as well. He was notoriously mistrustful, to the point of paranoia, of all his comrades and subordinates except those whose loyalty had been tested in the fight. This was a lasting legacy of Stalin's gang activities. Once his dictatorship had been established, he needed constant battles, new campaigns of terror, to test his supporters once again. As Montefiore shows in often gruesome detail in this brilliant book, Stalin's years in the conspiratorial underground and the frequent revelations of police spies in the Bolshevik movement, culminating in the exposure of Malinovsky in 1917, taught the Soviet dictator to suspect traitors everywhere. In his periodic killing-sprees he learned to play it safe, to murder more potential enemies than strictly necessary as an insurance policy, as Stalin and his supporters would later rationalize the Great Terror. 'Like Banquo's ghost,' writes Montefiore, Malinovsky 'haunted Soviet history.'

> If Malinovsky could be a traitor, why not the Soviet marshals, why not the entire General Staff, why not Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and most of the Central Committee, all shot as spies during the 1930s on Stalin's orders? [243]