

GEOFFREY ROBERTS

A Subversive, Not a Psychopath

Stalin: Passage to Revolution

By Ronald Grigor Suny

(Princeton University Press 857pp £30)

Joseph Stalin kept no diary, wrote no memoirs and evinced little interest in his personal background. He had nothing but disdain for would-be hagiographers among his acolytes. When Mikhail Bulgakov wrote a play about Stalin's youth, he vetoed its production, saying that 'all young people are alike, why write a play about the young Stalin?'

Only grudgingly did Stalin accept the utility of a biography that would feed his personality cult. When the first edition of the official *Short Biography* was published in 1939, he affected to have no time to read it. Although very involved in the preparation of the postwar edition, he complained of it, 'What should the reader do after reading this biography? Get down on their knees and pray to me?'

Stalin had a particular aversion to fantastical stories about his childhood, urging the burning of a book aimed at young people because it inculcated into the consciousness of Soviet children 'a cult of personalities, great leaders and infallible heroes'. Another bugbear was inaccurate, laudatory accounts of his early political activities that gave him too much credit. 'A historian has no right', Stalin wrote on one occasion, 'to just take on trust memoirs and articles based on them.' They have a duty to examine them critically and to verify them on the basis of objective information.'

By Stalin's own lights, his life only grew interesting and meaningful when, at the age of twenty-one, he became a professional revolutionary. He never tired of revisiting and reflecting on the years of his political formation. Much more important to Stalin than any biography was the publication of his collected writings. This record of his political views would, he hoped, be his true legacy.

Now we have Ronald Grigor Suny's long-awaited magnum opus, the great bulk of which is devoted to Stalin's political life in the Bolshevik underground. There is no one better equipped to cover this. A Georgianist

as well as a Russianist, equally comfortable with social, cultural and political history, Suny outclasses previous biographers of the young Stalin.

The study of Stalin's early life is a minefield of misinformation. 'When it comes to Stalin', writes Suny, 'gossip is reported as fact, legend provides meaning, and scholarship gives way to sensationalist popular literature with tangential reference to the reliable sources.' Among the more egregious myths is that Stalin was a tsarist police agent (he wasn't), that he murdered his father (who died of alcoholism in 1909) and that he was a bank robber (Suny shows that Stalin was peripheral to the great Tbilisi bank heist of June 1907 that features so prominently in Simon Sebag Montefiore's *Young Stalin*).

As Suny notes, Stalin's biographers have tended to neglect the intricacies of the Russian revolutionary underground – its internal politics, factions and personalities. Yet that was Stalin's world for nearly twenty years. This was the environment in which his character and personality were formed. Suny's method is to examine all the elements that shaped the young Stalin: family, church, multicultural Georgia, the revolutionary intelligentsia, prison and exile. Stalin's choice to become a revolutionary was not pathological, as some psycho-historians have claimed, but the result of a radical and understandable desire to do something about capitalist oppression.

As a young revolutionary, Stalin quickly gravitated to Lenin's Bolshevik faction in the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party. Stalin was devoted to Lenin, whose political style had a huge and enduring

impact on him. In Lenin's outlook, Suny states, 'sharp ideological distinctions, principled divisions, and purity of position were turned into virtues. Accommodation, compromise, and moderation were thrown aside in favor of an impatient commitment to action. Conciliation was in Lenin's view a negative quality for a militant revolutionary.'

To Stalin, practice was as important as theory: he preferred party unity to factionalism and was pragmatic in his approach to many issues. His beliefs were strongly held but he was quite capable of changing his mind in the light of knowledge and experience. Above all, Suny's Stalin is an intellectual, dedicated to endless reading and learning, which he saw as the means to bring socialist enlightenment to the masses. 'Send me some books' was Stalin's most frequent request to his comrades while he was imprisoned or exiled in Siberia.

In his conclusion, Suny provides a bridging analysis that aims to connect the pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Stalin: 'Before 1917 Stalin was animated by a complex of ideas and emotions, from resentment and hatred to utopian hopes for justice and empowerment of the disenfranchised.' However, after the revolution 'feelings for others were displaced or suspended and were trumped by personal and political interests ... Once in power those earlier emotions and ideals were subordinated to the desire to hold on to the power so arduously and painfully acquired.' This comes perilously close to the reductionism that he deplores in some other biographies of Stalin. The post-1917 Stalin, Suny tells us, was manipulative, emotionally controlled, lacking in empathy, arrogant, dogmatic, inflexible, wilful and obsessed with power – in other words, all the usual stereotypes. This jars with his subtle treatment of the pre-revolutionary Stalin. After all, the post-revolutionary Stalin was as complex and contradictory as his younger self.

This book has been more than thirty years in the making and it doesn't disappoint. It is a monumental work of history and its treatment and evocation of the young Stalin will never be bettered. But it left me wanting more, wishing that Suny had written a full biography of Stalin to complete the mosaic he so brilliantly starts piecing together in this book.

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