

Portait of the Tyrant as a Young Man

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The twentieth century has rightly been described as the century of “mega-death” — death on a scale unprecedented in human history. The century was also an era of “mega-murderers,” with tyrants such as Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot perfecting the machinery of death. Tyrants in the past may have had similar visions of massive murder, but the machinery of modernity made death on this scale possible in the last century.

For Americans, the most morally awkward of these murderous tyrants is Joseph Stalin. The awkwardness is rooted in the fact that he, alone among these tyrants, was for some time a crucial ally of the United States during World War II and the effort to defeat Hitler’s Third Reich. At least some American leaders knew the reality about

“Uncle Joe,” but this truth was largely hidden from public view during the war.

In *Young Stalin*, historian Simon Sebag Montefiore looks to the childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood of Joseph Stalin. The work is massive, authoritative, and captivating. Montefiore leads his readers to see the emergence of a murderous dictator — even in his youngest years.

Montefiore is an established historian and biographer of Stalin. His earlier work, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, looked at the career of Stalin — especially his years as the dictator of the Soviet Union. This book is, if anything, more interesting because it covers less-known territory.

The book reveals Stalin’s questionable paternity — a big issue in his troubled boyhood. He was abused by the man he called father and spoiled by an indulgent mother. He was surprisingly intellectual, passionate about reading books — especially forbidden books. He attended a Russian Orthodox seminary for boys as a candidate for the priesthood and was known there as “Soso,” the lead chorister.

Nevertheless, the violence and poisonous personality traits that would later be visited upon the world were visible early. Soso lost his faith and joined radical movements, eventually becoming part of the inner circle around Lenin, whose successor he became through more violence and murder.



Young Stalin is richly detailed. We read, for example, that the young Stalin, still a young boy, wavered in his faith after reading Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. All this leads to Stalin’s tyrannical rule. As Montefiore explains, the character of the young Stalin is important precisely “because the nature of his rule was so personal.”

In the end:

Soso was old, sclerotic and forgetful, yet until his death aged seventy-four, on 5 March 1953, the ageing choirboy remained the peerless politician, paranoid megalomaniac and aberrant master of human misery on a scale only paralleled by Hitlerite Germany. Responsible for the deaths of around 20 to 25 million people, Stalin imagined he was a political, military, scientific and literary genius, a people’s monarch, a red Tsar.

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