culturebox

The Gulag Argumento

Martin Amis swings at Stalin and hits his own best friend instead.

By Anne Applebaum

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Judging by the reviews, Martin Amis' new book, *Koba the Dread*, will produce an unusually wide range of reactions—but that is hardly surprising. Although Amis is best known as a novelist, *Koba the Dread* is a truly unique, not to say peculiar, work of nonfiction: a potted history of Stalin's reign ("Koba" was Stalin's nickname), plus a few random, mostly trivial vignettes from Amis' own life, plus some less trivial but out-of-context ruminations on the deaths of Amis' father and sister. Michiko Kakatuni in the *New York Times* called *Koba the Dread* "the narcissistic musings of a spoiled, upper-middle class litterateur who has never known the kind of real suffering Stalin's victims did." By contrast, Paul Berman, in the Sunday *New York Times*, thought it a "very curiously tinted book, idiosyncratic in the extreme," which nevertheless "carries a punch, artfully delivered."

Still, most reviewers seem to agree that whatever the book's faults—and however odd its digressions into subjects like the Bolsheviks' "politicization of sleep"—Amis has at least done us all a favor by bringing attention to a neglected subject. Kakutani writes that the book "does a credible job of conveying just how Stalin went about 'breaking the truth.' " Andrew Stuttaford, in the *National Review*, compliments Amis on the grounds that he offers readers a "brief, competent introduction to the Stalin years." And now Christopher Hitchens, writing in this month's issue of the *Atlantic*, applauds Amis because he "makes us wince again at things we already 'knew.' "

This compliment is not, however, why most people will remember Hitchens' review. For in this context, Hitchens is no ordinary book reviewer. Rather, he is both Martin Amis' best friend and—strange though it sounds—the anti-hero of *Koba the Dread*. In the course of the book, Amis effectively accuses Hitchens, a youthful Trotskyite (who will still call himself a Trotskyite, if asked), of covering up the truth about communism and links him to the socialist fellow-travelers of the past: H.G. Wells, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw. In the final pages of the book, Amis addresses his friend as "Comrade Hitchens," and solemnly lectures him about the "formula of dead freedom, lies and violence" with which the Bolsheviks ran revolutionary Russia.

As might be expected of one of the most acerbic writers of contemporary English prose, Hitchens responds in kind. After dispensing with the introductory compliments, he goes on to quote George Orwell's remark that terrible things happened during the Spanish Civil War, and "they did not happen any the less because the *Daily Telegraph* found out about them five years too late." Amis, he writes, can just about be excused for coming across Vorkuta and Kolyma (names of Soviet concentration camps) or Yezhov and Dzierzhinsky (names of Soviet secret police bosses) rather late in life, "but he cannot hope to get away with accusing others of keeping these facts and names from him, or from themselves."

The subsequent insults are a delight to read. Hitchens accuses Amis of "solipsism" and of "mushy secondhand observations," and quotes some satisfyingly silly bits of Amis prose. Among other things, we learn in *Koba the Dread* that Amis has nicknamed his baby daughter "Butyrka," on the grounds that her nocturnal screams "would not have been out of place in the deepest cellars of the Butyrki Prison in Moscow during the Great Terror." We have moved, writes Hitchens, "from darkness at noon to … lightness at midnight."

Few things are more amusing than the sight of fashionable literati insulting one another in print. Yet one finishes the review feeling that Hitchens isn't trying very hard. Of course Christopher Hitchens, a man who has publicly attacked Mother Teresa, can bat away a book that contains sentences like "I didn't read *The Great*

Terror [Robert Conquest's classic account of the purge years] in 1968 … but I spent an hour with it" without blinking an eye. More to the point—and contrary to the reviews—*Koba the Dread* is not, in fact, a competent account of Stalin's reign but rather a muddled misrendering of both Soviet and Western intellectual history. For that reason, the deeper points Amis seems to have been trying to make about the Western relationship to Soviet terror are lost on Hitchens and will probably be lost on everyone else as well.

Here I will resist the pedantic temptation to list Amis' many small errors of fact and emphasis (declaration of interest: I've spent the past five years writing a history of the Soviet Gulag). Suffice to say that while Amis has read perhaps a dozen-odd books about Soviet communism and the Russian revolution, he has done no original research; has hardly availed himself of any of the new, archive-based scholarship; and appears never to have met an actual camp survivor. If he has been to Russia, he doesn't tell us.

As a result, his account of the Soviet camps is skewed toward the sensational—the most extreme camps, the most horrific tortures—and fails to convey either the dull, gray, repetitiveness of daily life in the Gulag or the size and variety of the camp system, which had branches in virtually every region of the USSR and participated in virtually every industry. He also masks the true nature of the vast secret police bureaucracy, which was far likelier to arrest, sentence, and forget about people for a decade or two than to gouge their eyes out. For the most part, the "meat-grinder," as Solzhenitsyn called the system of Soviet repression, was not intended to kill or torture people but to reduce them to the status of cattle, who were worth feeding only as long as they could help boost production figures. For the most part, the horror of Soviet camp guards lay not in their sadism but in their total indifference to prisoners' fate.

Misleadingly, Amis also focuses at least a third of this book on the ghoulish personality of Stalin. While it is perfectly true that recent archival research has vindicated Conquest, an Amis family friend, in his long-held belief that Stalin himself was the main author of Soviet terror, Stalin didn't kill and imprison millions of his countrymen by himself. On the contrary—as archival documents show—Stalin issued orders commanding his secret policemen to execute precise numbers of people, and they wrote back, asking if they might possibly be allowed to execute even more. Amis writes that "since 1929 the Soviet Union had been a reflection of Stalin's mind"—but totalitarianism did not function, as the novelist seems to imagine, like a magic beam of light that emanated from a single brain. It was the product of institutions, of bureaucracies, and above all individual choices and decisions of millions of people. This is supposed to be a book about evil, in other words, but it doesn't even attempt to describe the base, nasty, and small-minded forms of evil of which even the most ordinary human beings are easily capable, given a base and nasty form of government.

Reading Amis' tale of horrors, tortures, and the human monster at the heart of it all, one would not know that ordinary people were involved at all. By the same token, it is impossible even to guess at what conceivable appeal the Soviet Union could ever have had to its many Western sympathizers and fellow-travelers. The only logical explanation is extreme stupidity, which is perhaps why even Hitchens comes off seeming idiotic in Amis' account. Yet while plenty of fellow-travelers were quite stupid (the Webbs come to mind here), far more found the slogans and the language of totalitarianism genuinely appealing. The masses, the struggle, the proletariat, the exploiters and exploited, the ownership of the means of production—these were all terms close to the hearts of the Western left, too.

But it wasn't even necessary to sympathize in order to be taken in. Henry Wallace, Roosevelt's vice president, actually visited Kolyma in 1944 and left without realizing that the healthy, well-fed workers he had seen were apparatchiks dressed up in miners' clothes for the day, or that the fine "amateur choir" he heard was composed entirely of prisoners, including many arrested musicians. The lesson here is not that Wallace was stupid, but that even people of average intelligence usually ask the wrong questions, usually find it hard to recognize horror when it doesn't look like a horror movie (or a paragraph from an Amis book)—and are therefore quite easily fooled.

But then, Martin Amis, who we must presume to possess at least average intelligence, is also capable of asking the wrong questions. Indeed, if we're talking about misunderstanding history, Amis' decision to focus his diatribe against the Western left on Hitchens, the self-confessed Trotskyite, was rather strange. While Trotskyites may not have emerged from the debris of the 20th century covered in glory, it is perfectly true that if anybody knew or cared about Stalinist terror, then it was they. Not only did Stalin murder all identifiable Soviet Trotskyites, after all, he also ordered one of his minions to use the sharp end of an ice pick on Trotsky himself.

By picking on his friend, in other words, Amis has also avoided—and allowed Hitchens to avoid—the larger and more important questions. Trotsky's extremist band of Stalin-obsessed followers aside, why did so many Western liberals fail to absorb the full horror of Stalinism while it was happening? Arguments among the comrades on the far left notwithstanding, why does Stalinism still not inspire anywhere near the same kind of horror as Nazism today? Hitchens writes that Amis occasionally makes us wince at things we "already know"—but who really does already know them? And who really cares? Certainly they aren't part of what one would call popular knowledge, or popular culture, or public debate. Certainly the people Martin Amis has been meeting at cocktail parties for the last few decades—with the possible exception of Hitchens—don't talk about them. Amis himself didn't have the slightest interest in the Soviet Union for most of his life, except to oppose the missiles that were aimed at it; that's part of why he's so enthusiastically telling us all about it now.

I long to hear Hitchens answer these points. Instead, he gets away with defending himself, George Orwell, and the small slice of the Western left that did know about, and did fight against, Stalinism. Which is perfectly legitimate but much too easy. What about everybody else?

In the end, one puts down *Koba the Dread* and wonders why it was written. Yes, indeed, Martin Amis appears to be very angry about something. Perhaps he is very angry about his father's death. Perhaps he is very angry about being a fiftysomething novelist who has run out of things to write about. Yet by inexplicably funneling his displaced anger into a poorly conceived, improbably hysterical diatribe against Stalinism, he has neither revealed anything new, nor retold old stories in an interesting way, nor done any victims any favors. Amis poses, at the start of the book, a legitimate question: Why do we think it is OK to make jokes about Stalinism, to laugh at a political system that killed millions of people? By the end of the book, we no longer want to know the answer.

Anne Applebaum is a member of the editorial board of the Washington Post. *Her book* Gulag: A History *won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction.*

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