

Saddam – The Secret Life by Con Coughlin. Pan, 2003 £7.99

Reading this book immediately before the outbreak of war against the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, and in the war's early days, gave added force to an already powerful text.

Saddam Hussein al Tikriti, a blood-soaked tyrant with utter contempt for all lives except his own, is revealed in meticulous detail in all his horror. His rise to the Presidency from his peasant origins is chronicled, his first acts of murder, his cynical betrayal of his earliest comrades, his destruction of political and military colleagues who let him down, his corruption and his brutalisation of members of his own family.

Coughlin also gives impressive detail on Hussein's long-established programmes to develop biological and chemical weapons, and his avowed intention – from the achievement of which he was believed in 1999 to be no more than five years away – of being the first Arab leader to have his own nuclear weapons.

No one emerges with any credit from this story. The Western powers now fighting him have aided Saddam in the past when it suited their geo-political purpose, the Germans helped him build his factories for nerve gas and biological agents, and the French constructed his nuclear reactors and supplied him with vast quantities of weapons.

Con Coughlin ends this excellent and timely book by noting that Saddam's greatest commitment has always been to his own survival. It will be interesting to see what postscript he attaches to a further printing of this most readable book later this year.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh