

Stalin – The Court of the Red Tsar by Simon Sebag Montefiore.  
Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003.

There are times in reading books when you know that you have in your hand something of unsurpassed quality and scholarship. Simon Sebag Montefiore's latest book, *Stalin*, engenders just that feeling, and if it does not win one of the most prestigious literary prizes available this year there will be no justice.

After many years of meticulous research, criss-crossing the lands of the former Soviet Union, access to unpublished and newly opened archive material and personal testimonies, Montefiore has produced an unsurpassed biography that will be a primary source for anyone interested in the history of the Soviet Union and particularly the life, work and persona of Stalin and the grotesque individuals who surrounded him.

A book of this size and intricacy is hard to summarise in a few paragraphs but the author traces the life and career of his subject from his early days as a young revolutionary to his apogee as the Generalissimo the very mention of whose name could make strong men quake with fear. It is a story of a husband, father, schemer, auto-didact, ruthless manipulator of men and women, and cruel and evil mass murderer, to name but a few facets of his character. But as the sub-title indicates, this is also a book about the women who loved Stalin, the men who enacted Stalin's policies and carried out his wicked plans, names that still have an aura to them, like Beria, Molotov, and Abakumov, and not just them but their families also, members of which routinely paid a terrible price for the involvement of their men in Stalin's court.

Montefiore writes of the extraordinary detachment of the early Bolsheviks from what we would call 'normal human emotions and reactions', enabling them to work with colleagues who they were denouncing or being denounced by, or members of whose families they were personally murdering or exiling to the Gulag. It is all chilling stuff.

It is astonishing when one considers the anti-Semitism that manifested itself with such destructive power in Stalin's last years, that many of his closest colleagues, and the family members of others, were Jews, albeit that their religious origins were only important from an ethnic rather than a religious viewpoint; indeed some of the most vicious denouncers of Jews under Stalin were his Jewish colleagues, desperate to prove their over-riding loyalty to the Boss.

On the humorous side Montefiore writes of the astonishing feasts to which Stalin subjected his magnates, starting late at night and often continuing until the morning; the food offered, especially when millions of ordinary Russians were starving to death, was unbelievably lavish, but the drinking was prodigious, so much so that some ended up dying of alcoholism engendered by their massive intake night after night.

Simon Sebag Montefiore has now written two superb books about major figures in Russian history, I for one shall eagerly await the next subject of his awe-inspiring, forensic intellect.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh