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Stalin: A Biography

By Robert Service

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Overthrowing the conventional image of Stalin as an uneducated political administrator inexplicably transformed into a pathological killer, Robert Service reveals a more complex and fascinating story behind this notorious twentieth-century figure. Drawing on unexplored archives and personal testimonies gathered from across Russia and Georgia, this is the first full-scale biography of the Soviet dictator in twenty years.

Service describes in unprecedented detail the first half of Stalin's life--his childhood in Georgia as the son of a violent, drunkard father and a devoted mother; his education and religious training; and his political activity as a young revolutionary. No mere messenger for Lenin, Stalin was a prominent activist long before the Russian Revolution. Equally compelling is the depiction of Stalin as Soviet leader. Service recasts the image of Stalin as unimpeded despot; his control was not limitless. And his conviction that enemies surrounded him was not entirely unfounded.

Stalin was not just a vengeful dictator but also a man fascinated by ideas and a voracious reader of Marxist doctrine and Russian and Georgian literature as well as an internationalist committed to seeing Russia assume a powerful role on the world stage. In examining the multidimensional legacy of Stalin, Service helps explain why later would-be reformers--such as Khrushchev and Gorbachev--found the Stalinist legacy surprisingly hard to dislodge.

Rather than diminishing the horrors of Stalinism, this is an account all the more disturbing for presenting a believable human portrait. Service's lifetime engagement with Soviet Russia has resulted in the most comprehensive and compelling portrayal of Stalin to date.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Here is a life-and-times biography in the grand style: deeply researched, well written, brimming with interpretations. Oxford historian Service, author of an acclaimed biography of Lenin, provides the most complete portrait available of the Soviet ruler, from his early, troubled years in a small town in Georgia to the pinnacle of power in the Kremlin. Most previous biographers have depicted Stalin as a plodding figure whose only distinguishing characteristic was brutality. But Service describes a man who was intelligent and hardworking, who learned from experience and who played an important role in the Russian revolutionary movement. On so many of the complex issues of Soviet history—including Stalin's rise to power within the Communist Party, the policy shift to forced collectivization, the Great Terror and the prosecution of the war against Nazi Germany—Service provides lucid accounts based on his own research and the most recent scholarship. Stalin was the key figure behind every major development from the mid-1920s onward. He based his policy decisions on his understanding of Marxism-Leninism and on a hardheaded, realistic assessment of his own often uneasy position and of the Soviet Union's relatively weak standing in the world. By providing such a rich and complex portrait of the dictator and the Soviet system, Service humanizes Stalin without ever diminishing the extent of the atrocities he unleashed upon the Soviet population. 47 b&w photos, 4 maps. (Apr.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Stalin has ascended to an equal plane with Hitler in the pantheon of world-class monsters and mass murderers. Yet, perhaps due to the relative unavailability of primary-source material, much of Stalin's life and his motivations remained a mystery. But recently released Soviet archival material, of which this fascinating and unsettling biography takes full advantage, has shed new light. Service, an esteemed scholar of Russian and Soviet history, does not minimize Stalin's crimes or absolve him of responsibility for the horrors of the Soviet era. He makes clear that Stalin, from his youth, was a "damaged" personality with a propensity for brutality against both friend and foe. But, as Service convincingly illustrates, this monster was a human who could write sensitive poetry, dote on family members, and inspire loyalty. Furthermore, the paranoia that permeated the reign of Stalin and led to the Great Terror descended not from Stalin but from an adherence to a pseudoreligion that encouraged followers to shape, even twist, their perceptions of reality to conform to absolute truth. A necessary reappraisal. *Jay Freeman*

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Review

Here is a life-and-times biography in the grand style: deeply researched, well written, brimming with interpretations. Oxford historian Service, author of an acclaimed biography of Lenin, provides the most complete portrait available of the Soviet ruler, from his early, troubled years in a small town in Georgia to the pinnacle of power in the Kremlin. Most previous biographers have depicted Stalin as a plodding figure whose only distinguishing characteristic was brutality. But Service describes a man who was intelligent and hardworking, who learned from experience and who played an important role in the Russian revolutionary movement...By providing such a rich and complex portrait of the dictator and the Soviet system, Service humanizes Stalin without ever diminishing the extent of the atrocities he unleashed upon the Soviet population. (*Publishers Weekly* 2005-02-21)

For an understanding of Stalin the man, the leader, the Georgian, the Russian nationalist, the revolutionary, the party politician, the mass murderer and the international statesman, and his place in modern Russian

history--Robert Service's book is unsurpassed. (Harold Shukman, author of *Stalin's Generals*)

[A] profound and readable assessment of the Soviet dictator.... Service paints a picture of a ruthless man absorbed in the pursuit of politics, widely read, perceptive, cunning and, despite a self-effacing and isolated persona, the stuff of leadership. (Richard Overy, *The Mail on Sunday*)

Service revises every dimension of this multidimensional titan. His book emphasizes the importance of Marxist ideology, economics and Bolshevik culture. But it also rightly presents a human Stalin ... Gritty and unshowy, but enlightened by Service's compelling characterization, magisterial analysis and dry wit, this outstanding biography of lightly worn authority, wide research and superb intuition will be read for decades. (Simon Sebag Montefiore, author of *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*)

Robert Service's brilliant biography of Stalin is a major work: the fruit of long research, profound insight and understanding of his subject. It offers a truly rounded and thoroughly readable portrait of this monstrous figure. (Andrew Roberts, *Daily Telegraph*)

This is effectively the first full biography since perestroika to encompass the economic, political, diplomatic, military, administrative and, above all, ideological dimensions, as well as the personal aspects of Stalin's colossal life. Gritty and unshowy, but enlightened by Service's compelling characterisation, magisterial analysis and dry wit, this outstanding biography of lightly worn authority, wide research and superb intuition will be read for decades. (Simon Sebag Montefiore *Sunday Times* 2004-10-10)

A profound and readable reassessment of the Soviet dictator...Service paints a picture of a ruthless man absorbed in the pursuit of politics, widely read, perceptive, cunning and, despite a self-effacing and isolated persona, the stuff of leadership...Stalin was no fool; he could scarcely have become dictator of a vast nation if he had been. Yet his contemporaries, and many historians since, have underestimated him. Service makes sense of Stalin's achievements by making us take him seriously...Stalin's power at its peak was immense and daunting. Service reminds us that a quarter of Russians recently polled put the Stalin years top of the list of periods in Russian history they most admired...This shrewd biography helps us understand clearly and dispassionately why not everyone remembers Stalin as a murderous ogre. (Richard Overy *The Mail on Sunday* 2004-10-31)

Service triumphs in portraying Stalin's personality in the context of his times...This book is a tour de force. Not only does Service trace Stalin's road to dictatorship, he shows us what he did with absolute power...No one has shown in more convincing detail than Service Stalin's evolution to the absolute power that corrupts absolutely. It is, above all, a balanced account. He has the courage to confess that the monster, in his shabby clothes and worn-out boots, dying alone in his dacha, soaked in his own urine, remains for him an enigma, not least because of the tyrant's consistent massaging of his own image. (Raymond Carr *The Spectator* 2004-12-04)

In his new biography of the Soviet dictator, Robert Service has given the most convincing description yet of how Stalin's insecure Georgian childhood fashioned his psychology. At key points in the book, we are reminded of Stalin's duality--on the one hand he was a proud Caucasian toughie who organized bank robberies and could drink spirits all night. On the other, he was a man who aspired to understand and interpret (crassly) high art and politics...This is the first serious political biography of Stalin since the opening of the archives in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the 1990s and Service has made good use of them. (Misha Glenny *Irish Times* 2004-11-27)

In Service's eyes, Stalin remains ruthless, cunning and murderous. But a richer and more complex individual

emerges--and a more human one. Stalin is shown as lover, husband and father. A man who wrote poetry and loved singing. A serious communist political thinker and the best-read Russian leader since Catherine the Great...[Service] has written a masterly book, with great erudition, style and wit. Although there are still some Soviet-era archives that remain closed, this biography will surely stand the test of time. (Stefan Wagstyl *Financial Times* 2004-10-23)

In the course of this engrossing and well-researched book, Stalin emerges as a fascinating, complex figure. (Andrew Roberts *Daily Telegraph* 2004-10-09)

A common perception of Stalin is that of an oafish backroom bureaucrat who bludgeoned his way to the heights of power. But this image does not do justice to the multi-faceted and fascinating person who emerges in this latest biography. Drawing on fresh archive material, historian Robert Service lays the man bare and places him within the context of his times. He paints a picture of a talented politician who was driven by a severe personality disorder to behave in the way he did...Humanising him, Service believes, will help to identify future tyrants. Here he has struck the right balance and produced an intellectually cogent and highly readable account. (Gavin Engelbrecht *Northern Echo* 2005-02-01)

Service has written an unhurried, richly detailed and rigorously researched book, anchored in hundreds of sources--a vast but cleanly structured text, polished, fluent and brisk...Service gives us a portrait of a paranoid and murderous despot, not a one-dimensional, cartoonish baddie...Service greatly advances our understanding by deftly fusing the tale of the man with that of the doctrine to which he was fanatically beholden and the ethos and practices of the tiny underground party. (Leon Aron *Washington Post* 2005-04-17)

Service's fascinating new Stalin biography, the first comprehensive English-language treatment of his life since the opening of the Soviet archives in the mid-1990s, is full of historical what-ifs...*Stalin: A Biography*...is a major landmark in the recent scholarly reassessment of the notorious dictator who consolidated Soviet power, launched vicious purges against his own people (and indeed his own political party), defeated the Nazis in World War II, and launched the Cold War...Service's trumps all other volumes now available on Stalin's life. It synthesizes all the major narrative accounts and incorporates a good deal of revealing new information. (Andrew O'Hehir *Salon* 2005-05-05)

Service's biography is full-scale, eking out the details of Stalin's childhood and education (including his nearly complete seminary instruction)...Service has used material newly released from Soviet archives to understand Stalin during the Bolshevik revolution, showing how he learned butchery from Lenin and struggled to survive as Lenin's successor. Service's biography is...readable and accessible. (Harry Willems *Library Journal* 2005-06-01)

Stalin: A Biography...offers the most detailed account of his life, career and beliefs. (Andrew Nagorski *Newsweek* 2005-05-30)

[An] excellent new biography...Robert Service paints a picture of a warped monster of a man, insatiable in his pursuit of power, ruthless in his treatment of real and imagined rivals, remorseless in his murder of millions. Service's innovation is to reveal Stalin's frailty--above all, his capacity for miscalculation. He made no blunder costlier than that of June 1941; yet he himself got off scot-free. (Niall Ferguson *New York Times Book Review* 2005-06-12)

A stimulating study of a monster whose thoughts and motives remain obscure. It also serves as a reminder that unbridled power is usually a recipe for disaster. (Lynwood Abram *Houston Chronicle* 2005-03-27)

This will likely serve for a long time as the most authoritative and comprehensive one-volume study of Stalin...Service portrays Stalin as an intellectual of sorts who read widely, although always within the wobbling worldview of Marxist-Leninism and with an eye to the usefulness of ideas in expanding and maintaining his own power...*Stalin: A Biography*, with its low-key, frequently wry, and exhaustively researched telling of the story, will be a standard reference for years to come. (*First Things* 2005-06-01)

Stalin made little distinction between his personal and political life, and as Service demonstrates in this balanced, tightly written work, it is necessary to consider each in the context of the other. Never abandoning his wide-angle lens, Service shows how Stalin's experiences of religion, nationalism, peasant lore, and imperialism became the channels through which he funneled his radical agenda...Keenly aware that by putting a human face on the monster he is exposing himself to charges of being an apologist, Service nevertheless perseveres in setting the record straight in this comprehensive and landmark biography...By painstakingly deconstructing Stalin's personal reinventions and self-created legacy, Service takes an important step toward revealing the man behind the myth. The more the tyrant is exposed for who he was, the harder it will become to wax nostalgic for his times. (Rebecca Reich *New Leader* 2005-03-01)

Stalin, a sequel to Mr. Service's *Lenin: A Biography*, presents a richly documented, highly persuasive portrait of the man who transformed the Soviet Union into a modern military-industrial power, terrorized millions and ruled over an empire that would have been the envy of the czars...Brick by brick, Mr. Service constructs a solid, accessible work that does as much as one book can to explain Stalin as a human being, and as the architect of a system that still weighs heavy on millions of citizens in the former Soviet Union. (William Grimes *New York Times* 2005-04-13)

A striking example of what solidly researched historiography with an appeal for a wider readership might look like. Erudite yet never abstruse, comprehensive and gripping at the same time, *Stalin: A Biography* should become required reading for students, specialists, and anyone else interested in modern history. (*Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*)

Service's impressive biography successfully challenges the conventional image of Stalin...Service has a remarkable talent for covering a lot of ground with clarity, brevity, and nuance. His portrait of Stalin is highly contextualized, and he balances his analysis of Stalin with a broader discussion of the historical events that the dictator both influenced and experienced. (Golfo Alexopoulos *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2008-01-01)

[Service's] biography of Stalin is the first in English touching on every aspect of the dictator's life, using resources made available since the *perestroika* era and the subsequent break-up of the USSR...This book, over its 715-plus pages, reveals a definite, even definitive, mastery of its topic...The insights seem fresh and original, helped by the author's trenchant style, his robust, short sentences...[M]ore than any other biographer, Service shows the human?indeed inhuman?figure at the centre of all this activity and his daily routine in his rise to the power of life and death over everyone in the USSR. Underpinning this is the author's broad thesis that the personal and political in Stalin were so intermingled, as to be indistinguishable?more so than with any other tyrant...[A]ny criticism of a scholar who has scaled the mountain that is Stalin's life, with such dedication and mastery, cannot be very substantial. The author's very achievement casts a huge shadow?benign in his case?over any critic. (Tony Wilson *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 2006-01-01)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Tessie Springfield:

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