

## PAPERBACK BOLSHEVIKS

- \* Simon Sebag Montefiore. Stalin - The Court of the Red Tsar. Phoenix. £9.99. 720 pages.
- \* Anne Applebaum. GULAG: A History of the Soviet Concentration Camps. Penguin. 677 pages.
- \* Norman Davies. Rising '44 - The Battle for Warsaw. Pan, £9.99. pages 752.
- \* Robert Service. A History of Modern Russia. Penguin, £12.99. 658 pages.

IT WAS THE Chinese communist Chou en Lai who - when asked what he thought the enduring lessons of the French Revolution might be - pondered deeply for a very long time and then remarked that it was too early to say.

The same observation might well be made with regard to the Russian revolution of 1917, along with the Soviet state and empire which followed it over the next 70-odd years. But a shoal of recent books in paperback form might go some way to begin the process of making sense of the Bolshevik experiment, and what its lessons (if any) might be for this present 21st century and its successors.

That Soviet affairs were for the most of the time bloodily and brutally murderous is, of course, nothing new: Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror* and Nikolai Tolstoy's *Stalin's Secret War* told us all about it long ago (while the same ground was covered in fictional form by Victor Serge's *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, and Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*).

But since the collapse of the USSR, once-secret archives have opened to researchers writing in English: and it is on these that Simon Sebag Montefiore has drawn for his masterly portrait of Stalin's court and courtiers, at work and play. He has availed himself of a huge amount of material in the form of the private letters, telegrams, memoranda and diaries of those involved, along with lengthy interviews with survivors, and has organised and paced his account beautifully.

The book is enormously readable and could easily be twice as long as it is: in places, indeed, such as with his coverage of the Doctors' Plot, it might be thought a little skimmed, for the reader, astonishingly, wants more detail rather than less. He deftly avoids the danger of hagiography (and for a man as politically talented as Stalin, that must always be a danger, in any account that looks for balance and insight).

Montefiore's story never rises to tragedy - for that we need one of the native poets or memorialists - but his command of telling detail and narrative drive is compelling. Nor does Montefiore unduly trouble his readers with some of the big why's and what-if's of Stalinism: among them, why didn't the party ditch Stalin, as it might have done, at the 1934 Congress; what if Stalin had pre-emptively attacked Germany in 1940 or early 1941, or at least foreseen the German attack in the summer of that year; and what if Stalin had not destroyed the best of party and army and not surrounded himself with a revolving cabal of brutal and murderous guttersnipes (of which Comrade Stalin was just a little more than *primus inter pares*)?

But these are trifling criticisms. No less an authority than Henry Kissinger has let it be known of the book that, 'I did not think I

could learn anything new about Stalin but I was wrong': and by one leading 20th century war-criminal on another, that is high praise indeed.

Anne Applebaum, meantime, is the sort of journalist usually described as distinguished: and her book certainly validates that description in triumphant fashion. She takes as her subject just one aspect of the Soviet regime: the concentration and slave-labour camp system, or GULag, established under Lenin, granted rich theoretical status by Trotsky (who observed that the description of slave-labour as inefficient was 'the worst type of bourgeois prejudice'), and brought to glorious concretion by the Great Stalin.

Applebaum, now a columnist for the New York Post, covered eastern Europe for the Economist during the collapse of communism, and she has based her book on very extensive use of survivor-interviews (or oral history, as some would sneeringly describe it), recently published memoirs and newly-opened archival material from the vaults of the secret police.

In all, something like 18 million people passed through the GULag in its glory years from 1929 to 1953, of whom perhaps four million died of hunger. (This is not to count another six million sent into exile, the many millions who died in Soviet-inspired famines in the Ukraine and elsewhere, the millions lost to Germany by military mismanagement, or the huge numbers murdered by the security Organs without the option of the GULag).

Applebaum tells her story of coal and gold mining at Vorkuta and Kolyma lucidly and (in the circumstances) in an astonishingly even-handed way. She is no apostate or émigré or survivor and does not bring their visceral hatreds to her story: and perhaps it is all the better for it.

Norman Davies also concerns himself with just one aspect of the Stalinist empire. His account of the Warsaw rising of 1944 (as opposed to the ghetto rising of the previous year) follows the present fashion for big, readable accounts of military affairs, along the lines of Anthony Beevor's recent work (in the majestic wake of John Erickson) on the battles for Stalingrad and Berlin. But Davies' book (his 'consultants' range, somewhat bizzarely, from Professor Wlodzimierz Brus to Sir Max Hastings!) is also, of necessity, about Soviet politics and territorial ambition in the post-war world of central Europe.

After all, Poland had (once again) been partitioned between Germany and Russia in 1939. Following the former's attack on the latter in 1941, Poland was under German occupation for some more terrible years. But Polish resistance, and hopes for an independent post-war Poland, were not extinguished. And by the summer of 1944, with Stalin's armies at the gates of Warsaw, the Poles saw a chance to help throw the Germans out of their country, with Soviet assistance, and re-establish the independent republic of the inter-war years. In this expectation of Soviet assistance, they could not have been more mistaken, however.

While the city rose, with stupendous heroism on every hand, the Russians watched and waited. The insurgents fought for 63 days, into the autumn days of October: but the attempt may have been doomed from the start. Stalin had hundreds of divisions in and around Poland; the British and Americans divisions had barely fought their way out of the Cherbourg peninsular; and the Pope, famously, had no divisions at all.

With the destruction of the Rising - at a cost of perhaps 200,000 lives and 30 square miles of rubble - the last hope for an independent Poland had gone.

The stage was set for the infinitely savage and profoundly duplicitous Sovietisation of Poland, and the destruction of such of its natural leadership as had survived. The hideous troika of Berman, Bierut and Hilary Minc (who will be unforgettably familiar to all readers of Teresa Toranska's *Them*, published in 1985) was on the threshold of power. The military hero Fieldorf, pseudonym Nile, alias Valenty, was so badly beaten, for instance, that he listened to his sentence of death from a stretcher, and was hanged with a length of vengeful string.

Some Poles, of course, escaped from the consequences of their bloody mid-century history. One was Lt. Col. Helena Wolinska, who signed the arrest warrant for 'Nile', and who was able in later years to retire to the comfort of university life at Oxford (and contest Polish attempts to extradite her in the cause of court-proceedings relating to the judicial murder of 'Nile').

Another was Isaac Deutscher, one of the very few Polish communists (along with Gomulka) to survive Stalin's destruction of the 5,000-strong pre-war Polish party. As late as 1967, Deutscher could assure an audience at the university of Cambridge that it was impossible for the Russian revolution to end in failure: 'the revolution seems to have outlasted all possible agents of restoration'.

How surprised, then, would he be to consult the closing chapters of Robert Service's *History of Modern Russia*!

This is essentially a sober historical survey by an academic rather than a journalist, and has the strengths and weaknesses to be

expected from such an approach. There is a greater focus on analysis than on colourful detail (though who knew that general Zhukov, the leader of Soviet Man as the latter gang-raped and plundered his way towards Berlin, planned to capture Hitler alive and parade him through Red Square - in a steel cage?)

Service takes his reader from the late Tsarist economy through the Bolshevik putsch of 1917, to War Communism, NEP, collectivisation, industrialisation and mass Terror, the disasters and final victory of World War Two, imperialism in central Europe, and - from the mid-'fifties - de-Stalinisation.

Throughout his account, he certainly does not omit reference to some of the big 'what-ifs' of Soviet history. But if his story of the precipitous decline and fall of the Soviet empire is intriguing, it does not fully answer the 'why' of its collapse. Nor does he speculate about the USSR's capacity to survive - for instance - the Internet. Perhaps, of course, these sorts of intuitions are not the proper responsibility of the academic historian. (And in any case, if a world-power like the USSR can implode in a handful of years, what other world-powers, such as the USA, might, however unexpectedly, do likewise?)

As Service observes, 'It is a delusion of the age, after the dissolution of the USSR, to assume that capitalism has all the answers to the problems faced by our troubled world. Communism is the young god that failed; capitalism, an older deity, has yet to succeed for most of the world's people most of the time'.

For: Scottish Left Review.