

Hitler, Stalin, and the nature of tyranny

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Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives

by Alan Bullock

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Alan Bullock has modeled this fascinating book in some respects on *Plutarch's Lives*, the classic of the 1st century A.D. in which the Graeco-Roman historian attempted to point up the morals he saw inherent in the study of history, through the device of writing "parallel lives" of the great conquerors and warlords of the age.

Here, Bullock arranges and portrays, through lengthy twin biographies, an incredible scope of 20th-century history, and succeeds in making it a moral history, of the type the ancients often wrote, and most moderns avoid.

The moral and morality which Bullock conveys above all are the value of the individual human person; the inestimable importance of the individual's right to freedom, as expressed best in the remarkable assertion of the Declaration of Independence that all men "are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." The genius of that phrase lies in the words "Pursuit of Happiness"—the individual's God-given right to a conscience and personality, and thoughts, and happiness, of his own.

Directly drawn from the lives of Bullock's two subjects is the corollary insight that all ideologies which deny the importance of the individual are identical—no matter how opposed they superficially seem.

In the middle decades of the 20th century, the inalienable rights of millions of people were stripped away, and with their rights, their lives. There erupted enormous organized evil in which masses of people participated, and masses of people died; ideologies of death and destruction which were explicitly philosophically opposed to the truths the Declaration of Independence calls self-evident. This 20th-century eruption culminated, like classical tragedy, in cataclysm—War and Holocaust.

Countless books have been written on the Second World War. This one sets out to illuminate the world views that made it possible, the outlook of the two men who, more than any others, made that terrible history.

The approach

Probably the most fundamental way in which we learn, and then may come to understand, history is through biography. What is too vast—and, as with Nazism and Bolshevism, too hideous—to fathom in a mass of fact, can best be seen through study of the lives of the individual actors. Even when history's outcome is radically different from what its makers purposed, it is those individual men who made it, and not impersonal forces.

Therefore, this double biography of Hitler and Stalin, two "great bad men," in Carlyle's phrase, contributes enormously to our efforts to understand what happened in our century.

Comparison of historical figures is usually shallow, at best, but not in this case.

For one thing, the personalities of Hitler and Stalin—born together, like twins, from the irrationalist and monstrous delusions of twin ideologies of the end of the 19th century—collided in the greatest war mankind has ever known. They were each other's Nemeses.

The personalities were very different, in fact, as Bullock shows; so were the ideologies of National Socialism and Bolshevism—and yet, in their effect of terror and misery, remarkably similar, because they shared the premises of utter contempt for human beings' lives and happiness, and hatred for the Judeo-Christian culture that each vowed to destroy. Hitler and Stalin were authentic heirs of the late 19th century's radical rejection of past European civilization based on notions of reason and progress; radical rejection of the civilization which had led to the American Revolution and its assertions about Man.

The two men's commonality is crystallized in the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939—that prelude to their shared "great adventure" (as Hitler called it), of blasting Old Europe out of history. Their collision, of course, was the Second World War on the Eastern Front, ultimately destroying Hitler and Nazi Germany, and bringing into the center of Europe the Soviet colossus.

Bullock wrote this book as the Soviet power was vanishing, probably the first major work on Stalin to be written in the aftermath of the Soviet empire. Thus, he was in the position of being able to look back on the Soviet Union, and to write from an intellectual distance which strengthens his insights.

The ideologies

In *Hitler and Stalin*, we are confronted with one man whom we might call the ultimate Romantic, and another whom we might call the quintessential Materialist.

The ideology of Nazism derived from the currents of racist, *volkische* Romanticism best represented at the close of the 19th century by Richard Wagner, the composer of a pagan body of work whose central premise was Un-Reason—or, as Wagner expressed it, the salvific role of the unconscious impulses to destruction (“cleansing”) and re-creation, which he believed were carried as biological properties of the “Germanic peoples.” Exaltation of the “Aryan” (Nietzsche’s “blond beast”), and debasement and hatred for the “inferior peoples,” above all, the Jews. Combined with this, love of Death as being the deepest expression of every true emotion.

This was racial mysticism, found in Wagner, Dostoevsky, and countless lesser figures—and it became Hitler’s particular variant of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism. Hitlerism was, as Bullock says in his 1952 biography, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, the philosophy of the Viennese gutter, the crudest kind of social Darwinism, made into transcendent religious experience. Hitler absorbed its components as a young man in *fin de siècle* Vienna. To this ideology he contributed one thing new: his utter, radical *literalness*. He *practiced* what all the others, from Wagner to the Count de Gobineau, had only preached. A “terrible simplifier,” he put together the bits and pieces of racial villainy and adulation of war which he had imbibed, into a ferocious and systematic world view, at the core of which stood what Hitler called the “saving doctrine of the absolute insignificance of the individual” (and its complement, the infinite value of the “Race”).

Now turn to Stalin’s Materialism. Marxism had had a long theoretical existence when Stalin came to it. “Dialectical materialism,” Vladimir Lenin’s own brand, lay ready-made to Stalin’s hand. Where Hitler was the theoretician of a Nazi movement he himself had hallucinated, Stalin never laid claim to having developed the theory, nor founded the movement, that became the Bolsheviks. His role was as its only “interpreter,” particularly after he had seen to it that all his rivals were dead.

Materialism taught that human beings were socially determined, by physiology, class, economic reality, means of production; and that all history is the product of inexorable forces, economic and material, moving inevitably from one stage in organization to another. In this world view of Stalin’s, the individual is of no consequence at all, certainly not (as for Hitler) as hero or devil. The only real personality is that of the Historical Forces; the human beings are just History’s more or less effective handmaidens, and hence entirely expendable.

The personalities

Hitler’s god was the race, but more than that, the pagan deity he usually called Providence, whom he believed commanded him to purify the world; a god of war and blood, the god of the “Aryan race,” to whom the ultimate propitiatory

sacrifice was the slaughter of a people chosen by the *other God*, the God of the Bible. And thus, Hitler killed *out of principle*. The extermination of the Jews was not expedient; far from it—the huge machinery involved in the Holocaust was diverted, deliberately, from the effort of “total war.” But the extermination of the Jews was the fundamental statement of Hitler’s beliefs about his god, his universe, and his mission.

Stalin killed for different reasons; for expediency, to remove obstacles—because he could think of no other way to deal with opposition, except to drown it in blood. He killed to slake his paranoia, as well, for he was always terrified, as Hitler was not, that the men around him were plotting against him; that whole classes of people, or regions of the Soviet Union, were secretly scheming his downfall, and that of the grim, inhuman doctrine he represented.

Stalin was a sinister shadow, the paradigmatic *éminence grise* who haunted his country and his countrymen. The ultimate bureaucrat, Stalin achieved and operated his unlimited power through the organizations of the Bolshevik Party and the state institutions which flowed from that party in power. Rarely did he step out before the Soviet public; at bottom, there was no Soviet public. He ran a prisonhouse carefully sealed off from the West, a “workers’ state” in which every worker and peasant was an atom, isolated from all others, fragmented, dehumanized by the crushing power of the state.

That crushing power was expressed by Stalin in 1936 in chilling terms: “Do you know how much our state weighs, with all the factories, machines, the army, with all the armaments and the navy? . . . And can one man withstand the pressure of that astronomical weight?”

Thus, from 1924 onwards, through the 1930s, Stalin starved millions in Ukraine, lest they oppose his devastation of agriculture. He purged the Communist Party repeatedly, killing virtually every party leader who had participated in the Bolshevik coup of 1917, and using the Purge Trials of the mid-1930s to extend his deadly reach into the second, and third, and further levels. He used the mechanism of the Purge Trial to wipe out most of the leadership of the Red Army. In sum: a reign of terror that consumed millions, and fed Stalin’s thirst to murder more.

Although, as Bullock says, it is unprofitable for laymen to debate whether Hitler and Stalin were legally or clinically insane—“for whatever their psychological condition, in neither case did it disable them from functioning as masterly politicians”—there is no question that the core of Stalin’s personality was pathological paranoia. Every other human consciousness was a threat to Stalin; every mind capable of entertaining a thought—even if a thought *in agreement* with Stalin’s own dictates—was an “enemy of the people.” Thus Stalin murdered virtually everyone he ever worked with; slavish obedience and doglike loyalty guaranteed no one’s life. Not only did he kill off all the Leninist leadership of the Bolshevik Party; he killed off the men whom he used to kill

off his colleagues.

Stalin committed breathtaking perfidies with no sign of emotion, not even anger or hatred. There is something unspeakably horrifying about the mood of black humor in which he acted. Just as mind-destroying Marxist-Leninist “dialectical materialism” was the theoretical and cultural expression of absence of humanity, so his own character had the quality of mechanical force, glacial, deliberate, irresistible.

And, as other human consciousnesses threatened Stalin, so they threatened his Materialist world view, in which there were no people, only classes and forces.

How different was Hitler! His whole political career was an unrelenting courtship of the crowd. No bureaucrat, no gray eminence—but the absolute demagogue, the man of the people, always in the public eye, always interacting with his masses, continually stimulated and energized by the swirling mob. Awkward and even shy in private, but supremely confident in the midst of the mass.

In Hitler, we see a man prey to emotional upheaval, from rage and hatred to ecstatic self-identification with his god, a man whose whole life is a battle to impose his monstrous will to power on his *own* personality, first, and only then on the world. Stalin stands before us as a man with no internal conflicts; Hitler, as a man who is entirely conflict, held in check by a drastic effort of Kantian will. Hitler achieved a kind of glacial self-control, himself; a state of remoteness in which, as Hjalmar Schacht once said, “He never let slip an unconsidered word.” But that achievement was hard won; an artificial imposition, by Hitler on Hitler, of his conception of what a world-historical figure must be. At the end of his life, we see in him the psychological wreckage left behind by such a “triumph of the will.”

Like Stalin, he functioned with a horrible efficiency, for which his opponents were no match. But with Hitler, one is conscious of never being very far from the kind of madness the ancient Greeks described as Dionysian: A rigid self-control was required to keep in check an imagination that vaulted so high, it threatened to smash its possessor to pieces, as at last it did.

Where Stalin, with his soulless shark’s eyes, flat and empty, killed untroubled by any emotion, Hitler was a man whose emotions drove him to kill—because it answered compulsions religious in nature, of a religion altogether barbaric. Stalin murdered his closest collaborators, on the off-chance that some day they might threaten him. For most of his life, Hitler turned a blind eye to opposition among the men around him; he murdered people he had never seen or known—men, women, children, babes in arms—because his principles told him to. Stalin was a cynic, Hitler a visionary. Stalin never bothers to justify himself to his intimates; Hitler does so incessantly, to himself as much as to anyone (as in this characteristic remark from September 1941: “I would prefer not to see anyone suffer, not to do harm to anyone. But when I realize that the species [the Race—ed.] is in danger, senti-

ment gives way to coldest reason”).

Of the two, Hitler is more human, strangely—and more terrifying. Stalin is the man without a soul; Hitler, the man who sold his soul to the Devil. That is why, half a century later, when our culture requires an ultimate expression of evil, Hitler is that symbol.

The meaning

What are we left with? Their likeness lies in their devotion to diabolical views of the world which have made of the 20th century precisely what Nietzsche exultantly foresaw: the age in which God is dead, or marked out to be killed, by the Satanic figures who would storm heaven and make themselves gods.

Among Nietzsche’s hallucinatory writings on this topic is *Ecce Homo* (“Behold the Man”), in which he takes the phrase with which Pontius Pilate refers to Christ, and makes it refer instead to himself—Nietzsche/Lucifer, or perhaps Superman, in the age without God. That godless pride is *the* disease of the second half of the 19th century, and the whole of the 20th; above all, of Hitler and Stalin.

It is to such Luciferian rebellion that Bullock refers when he writes of Hitler’s “commit[ting] the sin that the Greeks called *hybris*, of believing himself to be more than a man.”

Harking back to Greek tragedy, Bullock adds, “No man was ever more surely destroyed by the image he created than Adolf Hitler.” This is more obviously true of Hitler than Stalin. Stalin won the war and died in his bed; Hitler lost on a staggering scale and died by his own hand, confronted by the shipwreck, not only of party and Reich, but of his own personality. Stalin’s shipwreck did not come till many years later, as Bullock writes, when there appeared, scrawled on the Berlin Wall just before it was demolished, “Stalin is dead; Europe lives.”

Of this book, Bullock commented, “Looking back, I cannot think of a better preparation for writing about Hitler and Stalin than a close study of Thucydides, Tacitus, and those sections of Aristotle’s *Politics* that deal with the Greek experience of tyranny.” One should add the great classical tragedians, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Schiller. Their plays explore tyranny and its destruction of Man; and tyrants’ self-destruction. In their tragedies we see the effects of that fatal flaw of *hybris*, of overweening pride, in which the tyrant believes himself more than a man, while other men are correspondingly devalued to nothing.

Perhaps the horrors of the Second World War, the demonism of Hitler and Stalin, demand a great playwright to tell their stories; our century has produced none. Still, using this book to look back at the terrible 20th century, we are prodded to understand the central importance of the assertion that God created Man in His image, and each man’s life is sacred to God. The horrors of our century are the result of the rejection of that truth, in favor of a renewed onslaught of paganism.