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Stalin: Breaker of Nations. by Robert Conquest  
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**Stalin: Breaker of Nations.** By Robert Conquest. New York: Viking, 1991. xvii, 337 pp. Index. Plates. Bibliographical note. \$25.00, hard bound.

Another biography of Stalin? Over the past fifty years, dozens have appeared from almost every possible political and interpretive point of view. Many of them, including Isaac Deutscher's *Stalin: A Political Biography*, the first serious scholarly contribution and one that still holds up, are still in print. More recently we have a number of formidable and insightful biographies from Adam Ulam, Ronald Hingley and the closely and critically documented study by Robert H. McNeal. In the past three years alone, in addition to the present treatment by Robert Conquest, we have the archive-based *Triumph and Tragedy* from Dmitri Volkogonov and an ongoing three-volume opus by Robert C. Tucker.

Yet, despite the unending stream of Stalin biographies, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* fills an important niche. Until now, we have not had a serious, readable treatment aimed at a popular audience. Previous attempts to produce such for a non-specialist audience have foundered either because they were ponderously long and tedious, or because omission of a scholarly apparatus led to semi-fictional stories based more on imagination than fact. Robert Conquest has managed to avoid these pitfalls and has produced a highly readable, manageable book, accessible both to non-Russianist scholars and the general public. Footnotes have been replaced by general references, the text is free from dizzying and technical Russian names and tiresome details, and the story moves along in the deft and polished writing style made familiar in the author's 27 previous books of history, poetry and criticism. Writing a popular, general work on a complex topic is extremely difficult and Conquest deserves much credit for this book.

Because of the nature of the project, a popular biography of Stalin or any other important figure is not likely to satisfy specialists on many points and perhaps it is unfair to subject such a book to the same kind of critical scrutiny scholarly monographs receive in professional journals. Still, it seems reasonable to highlight a few points in the book on which serious disagreement exists. Conquest's well known ideas on the 1932 famine as intentional genocide and on the Kirov killing as planned political murder are controversial, especially in light of recent scholarship in the west and new documents in Moscow. The author's claim that his views have received "official" support in the former Soviet Union is at least ambiguous; it is hard to see repetition of western views in the non-scholarly "thick" literary journals of the glasnost' period as "official confirmation" of those views. Given the contradictory publications in Russia at that time, including documents published in apparently "official" party journals that dispute Conquest's views, one may legitimately wonder what in 1989 was an "official" source and what was not.

There is similar ambiguity in the author's handling of memoirs. His statement, for example, that the memoir of Boris Bazhanov is "very useful, though not always authenticable" makes one wonder whether we can pick and choose the memories we like (or the rumors most often repeated) and discard the inconvenient ones. After all, the influential memoirist Alexander Orlov reports the existence of a real military plot involving Marshal Tukhachevskii, on the verge of overthrowing Stalin in 1937, in the same way that he reports a Stalin plan to kill Kirov: he heard both second hand.

Sometimes Conquest's language and judgments border on the incautious. It is surely a bit strong to say that the pro-FDR American policy-makers who followed what Daniel Yergin called the "Yalta" maxims displayed "selective sanctimoniousness . . . even more repulsive than their political stupidity." Similarly, the categorical statements denying the groundswell of pro-Stalin enthusiasm from the 1930s are easily contradicted by the overwhelming testimony available not only by reading, but by simply talking today to (non-intelligentsia) people who lived through the time. The author's slaps at western academics whose research reaches different conclusions (and whose sins include believing in this enthusiasm) are also sometimes gratuitous. Finally, one hopes that Conquest had his tongue in his cheek when he suggested that Stalin's antipathy toward Poles may have resulted "from their failure to let him defeat them at Lwow in 1920."

Despite such verbal flights of fancy, in my opinion the book displays a kind of interpretive distinction from some of the author's earlier works. Although Conquest has by no means gone soft on communism, the book is short on the repeated manichean characterizations of communism-as-evil that his earlier books used almost as an explanatory vehicle. Instead, we find in *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* some quite interesting allusions to environmental and social factors in Soviet history. Conquest is right when he points to the inability of partially educated, categorical-minded bolshevik politicians to comprehend social reality. Their narrow faith in a particular kind of nineteenth century science made it difficult for them to distinguish between fact and fantasy. He also realistically portrays a Stalin slow to adapt and adjust, unable to predict the future and (quoting Fedor Raskolnikov) "unable to weigh consequences." Similarly, and quite reasonably, Conquest is wary of making too much of Stalin's presumed childhood psychological traumas, and points out several times that ultimately we cannot know when Stalin decided what, or in general exactly what he thought. (It is, therefore, a bit surprising when in the book Stalin suddenly becomes a careful and brilliant planner of terror in the 1930s, only to lapse again into the willful but often befuddled tsar of the 1940s and early 1950s.)

Survey biographies are not likely to please everyone. But there is a place for them in our literature, if for no other reasons than to prevent academics from talking only to each other and to force us to explain things clearly. Even with its flaws, this book is the best short popular biography of Stalin.

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*In the Shadow of Antichrist: The Old Believers of Alberta.* By David Scheffel. Lewiston: Broadview Press, 1991. xvii, 252 pp. Illustrations. Tables. Bibliography. Paper.

This book joins several earlier works on Old Believer communities in North America. Although the subtitle promises an examination of "The Old Believers of Alberta," Scheffel's anthropological study in fact attempts to analyze one small Old Believer community in depth. This community is the village of Berezovka, situated roughly 250 kilometers northeast of Edmonton and numbering nearly 400 souls, making it the largest Old Believer settlement in Canada. The author sets himself the intriguing task of investigating this world which has struggled tenaciously to retain its faith and identity in its most recent Babylon.

Scheffel's study is markedly divided into descriptive and interpretive sections. The core of the book is the five chapters of anthropological analysis, covering the history and composition of the community, community and family life, and chapters on the practice of Orthodoxy, the role of the Church and religious life in the home. These sections contain much interesting material, in particular the chapters on the history of the community and on communal life. Most intriguing are several personal narratives tracing the Old Believers' wandering from Siberia to China, from there to South America and finally to Canada.

A fundamental problem, however, is Scheffel's understanding of the Old Believer community. His analysis reifies Old Believers into a separate and distinct category. Hence, Old Believers are contrasted to "ordinary Russians" and every distinctive aspect of Old Believer life is ascribed to the religious tenets alone. In addition, the author applies a strict contrast between assimilation and isolation in analyzing the Old Believers' relationship to the surrounding culture. Yet Scheffel himself describes the much greater adaptation of the Old Believers to various aspects of Canadian society, as opposed to stricter self-segregation in their earlier émigré outposts. In so doing he demonstrates a broad spectrum of selective adaptation somewhere between separation and integration.

Less revealing are the three interpretive chapters which have little in common with the anthropological chapters. Scheffel's chapter on the history of Old Belief is