

modernism. In *Mednyi vsadnik* particularly, Pushkin is also seen as the poet of existential suffering and loss, as the enlightenment panegyric of his ode to Peter the Great's St Petersburg contained in this poem is contrasted with Evgenii's madness following the great flood of 1824. This contrast was naturally of particular personal significance to those poets who lived through the upheavals of revolution, civil war and Stalinism, and among the most interesting parts of Smith's book are her analyses of the motif of the bronze horseman in works by Blok, Gippius, Maiakovskii and Reisner. Other poets whose work is examined closely for its approach to the city and modernity in the light of Pushkinian reference include Annenskii, Akhmatova, Pasternak, Gumilev, Khodasevich, Mandelstam and Lifshits.

Smith's final chapter is concerned with rather more disparate groupings of poets, who nevertheless draw substantively on Pushkin as a cultural and psychological reference point. She thus examines Pushkin's role as a focus of identity (representing both authority and the spirit of non-conformity) in the poetry of the Russian emigration, and particularly in works by Adamovich, Nabokov and Tsvetaeva. A final section outlines the curiously similar vision of the Leningrad poets of the 1960s and later.

Smith's work, as always, is full of ideas, making unexpected connections and drawing on a huge range of primary, secondary and theoretical materials in support of her arguments, and it is difficult to do justice to the scope of her thesis in a short review. *Montaging Pushkin* is, however, unfortunately marred by poor editing and poor proof reading; and, annoyingly, even though a list of supplementary readings has been appended to the bibliography, there are still in-text references for which it is impossible to find the complete citation. This is, nevertheless a work that will repay careful study for what it says not only about the Pushkin myth but also about the psychology of Russian modernism and the mechanisms of literary influence.

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Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 715 pp.

Stalin has long been known as one of the most villainous figures of world history. His bloody career presents the historian with something of a moral dilemma: should one concentrate primarily on the grisly aspect of his rule, and hence on the millions of victims who vanished in the gulag, were shot as enemies of the people, or simply starved to death as a result of brutal collectivization and dekulakization campaigns – or should one attempt a more balanced picture by drawing out the more humane sides of his character? In this new biography Robert Service opts for the latter course, and with good reason, as he states early on: ‘the lesson to be learned from studying several of the twentieth century’s most murderous politicians is that it is wrong to depict them as beings wholly incomparable to ourselves. Not only is it wrong: it is also dangerous. If the likes of Stalin, Hitler, Mao Tse-tung and Pol Pot are represented as having been “animals”, “monsters” or “killing machines”, we shall never be able to discern their successors’ (11–12). In other words, despite his notorious ruthlessness, Stalin should not be seen as a member of an alien species but as a human being with rather more than the ordinary share of character flaws. In adopting a more complex and therefore humanizing approach, Service follows predecessors such as Robert Tucker and Edvard Radzinsky who have both looked at Stalin from the angle of the psycho-biographer. Not surprisingly, the result is less a work of original research (though some novel sources including Stalin’s youthful poetry have been drawn on) than an admirable and highly readable synthesis that ought to become the standard account of Stalin’s life for years to come.

The body of the text is divided into five parts. Stalin’s early revolutionary period, his eventual leadership of the Communist Party, his rise to full-fledged despotism, his role as supreme warlord, and the culmination of his life as ‘imperator’ are dealt with chronologically, appropriately beginning with his childhood. Stalin’s early life is well known and needs little elaboration here. Though the young Koba, as he called himself at the outset of his career, initially failed to gain a prominent position in the Bolshevik party, his practical services earned him Lenin’s respect. But it was Lenin’s death that paved the way for his spectacular ascendancy. After having deftly outmaneuvered his rivals, he achieved a position of almost uncontested supremacy in the Communist Party. This allowed him to launch the first of a series of simultaneously ambitious and murderous Five-Year Plans (1928). Always given to vindictiveness and pathologically suspicious, these traits paradoxically assumed ever more alarming proportions the more he was

able to expand and consolidate his power. His paranoia culminated in the purges of the later 1930s that cost a large number of his erstwhile comrades their lives. Not only did this massive bloodletting weaken the military and old party elite, it also caused serious psychological damage, with the result that Soviet society was singularly unprepared to engage in a major military conflict in the early 1940s. Service makes it clear that Stalin dreaded such a war and sought to avoid it at all costs. When war came, he reacted by colossal blundering, sinking into temporary stupefaction, only to reemerge with a newly strengthened determination to succeed. The chapters on the war are some of the finest in a narrative rich in vivid episodes. As always, Service does not focus on Stalin alone but paints a far larger canvas that incorporates developments from the military, economic, cultural, and social front as well. The result is the dramatic picture of a society teetering on the brink of the abyss and seemingly held back by the iron will of a single man.

The author's claim to the contrary notwithstanding, there is little groundbreaking evidence in these pages. Indeed, the occasional flash of humanity that Stalin displayed does not alter the familiar image of a resourceful but cold-blooded mass-murderer that has become associated with Stalin's name. The book's real strengths lie not in a novel interpretation but in its author's vast expertise, his admirable powers of synthesis, the astuteness of his judgment, and, last but not least, the elegance and sparkle of his style. Disdaining lengthy discussions of scholarly debates that can interest none but the specialist, Service manages to present Stalin both as a product of his times and as an actor simultaneously shaping the times. The result is 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.

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Sven Eliaeson (ed.), *Building Democracy and Civil Society East of the Elbe: Essays in Honour of Edmund Mokrzycki* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 406 pp.