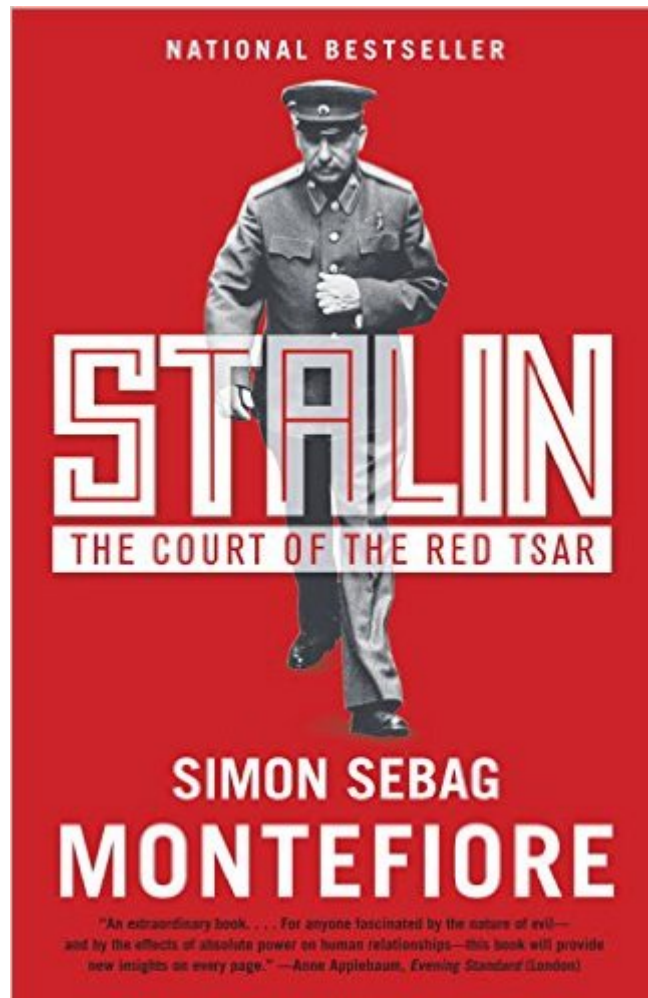


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Stalin: The Court Of The Red Tsar



Synopsis

This widely acclaimed biography of Stalin and his entourage during the terrifying decades of his supreme power transforms our understanding of Stalin as Soviet dictator, Marxist leader, and Russian tsar. Based on groundbreaking research, Simon Sebag Montefiore reveals the fear and betrayal, privilege and debauchery, family life and murderous cruelty of this secret world. Written with bracing narrative verve, this feat of scholarly research has become a classic of modern history writing. Showing how Stalin's triumphs and crimes were the product of his fanatical Marxism and his gifted but flawed character, this is an intimate portrait of a man as complicated and human as he was brutal and chilling.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Hannah Arendt, in her work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, coined the phrase 'banality of evil' to describe the rather bland existence of those who, like Eichman, were capable of committing unpardonable acts of unspeakable bestiality. Simon Sebag Montefiore's elegantly written *Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar* (Red Tsar) mines this same vein in his examination of the life of Stalin and his inner circle. Red Tsar provides the reader with an inside, almost voyeuristic, view of the life of Stalin and his circle from his accession to power after the death of Lenin until his own death in 1953. Montefiore does a masterful job of setting out the personal lives and inner workings of Stalin and his court against the backdrop of the extraordinary historic events that wracked the USSR during those times. During Stalin's rein the Ukraine was wracked by forced starvation in the Ukraine and rural masses were brutally killed and/or exiled in the anti-kulak campaign. Through show trials and purges and through

a war on the eastern front that will probably never be matched for horror and brutality, Stalin and his courtiers lived lives of bourgeois expectations and affectation that would be recognizable if they were played out in Moscow, Idaho and not the USSR. Red Tsar has been meticulously researched. Montefiore has done a marvelous job of examining newly opened Russian archives. He interviewed a large number of surviving family members of the inner circle and was provided access to diaries, memoirs, and personal correspondence that has not been seen by historians prior to this work. The end notes can be a bit confusing but it's clear that Montefiore's factual observations and his evaluations of those observations are grounded deeply in thorough research.

I must admit that I feel a bit of guilt for the compulsive manner in which I read this highly personal account of life in the court of Stalin. This well-told story is horrible, but fascinating. Montefiore makes no effort to dissect the big geopolitical issues of the Stalin era, except to use them as a backdrop to the backstabbing, denunciations, groveling, and horror in which the senior leadership of the Soviet Union operated from the early 30s until the early 50s. Using in-depth interviews and newly-available archival information, including much of the correspondence between and among the senior leadership, Montefiore fleshes out what was going on under the surface, in particular the complex love-hate (mostly hate) relationship of Stalin to his court. It's a wonderful account of a country run by leaders who viewed their role more as mafiosi than as leaders of a legitimate government. In a real sense, they were gangsters and that's the way they ran the country--including the way Stalin required the leadership to all participate in the Great Terror (he wanted all them to have blood on their hands and thus share in the collective guilt). The author's behind-the-scenes view of the Great Terror is the centerpiece of the book. His portraits of Yeshov and Beria, the two most malignant monsters after Stalin, will now be etched into my memory. But in the end, the book is a portrait of Stalin, a man who could turn on the charm, perform an act of kindness for an old comrade, then in the next moment sign the death warrants of hundreds of innocent victims. I disagree with other reviewers who criticize the author for treating Stalin too kindly. There's no question where Montefiore stands: he views Stalin as a monster, and Stalin's occasional human touches makes him even more so.

Eventually it may come to pass that conventional wisdom among historians will be that there is no more influential or terrible figure in Russian history- outdoing even Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great or Catherine the Great- than Joseph Vissarionovich Djughashvil who as a young Bolshevik took the name Stalin [Russian for steel]. The life of Stalin has been visited many times by historians,

biographers, in memoirs by those who knew him. A picture emerges of a calculating, Machiavellian paranoid committed to a state enforced regime of communism but above all committed to the elimination of real and perceived 'enemies' who stood in the way of his complete grasp of power. Simon Montefiore has done an outstanding job in revisiting the life of Stalin viewed through the lens of his personal life. What emerges is a more human view [if one can use that term for a man responsible for the most deaths of the 20th century] of the life of Stalin. Montefiore shows Stalin the father, the husband and the in-law. And what an in-law he was. Traumatized by the suicide of his second wife Nadya, Stalin becomes increasingly morose and irritated by her family. To that end most ended up being arrested and dying within the Gulag system, rather than protecting them, their ties to Stalin and the intimacy that comes with it is responsible for their deaths. Montefiore highlights how the inner circle of Russia's leadership strove to guess and to carry out their leader's policies. Stalin, the master manipulator, played his inner circle against each other. To be within the leadership was an honor and a dangerous place. One's fate and the fate of his family was tied to Stalin's mercurial attitude.

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