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Stalin: ‘He Couldn’t Have Done It Without Them’

by Richard Pipes

On Stalin’s Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics

by Sheila Fitzpatrick
Princeton University Press, 364 pp., $35.00

Photoquest/Getty Images
Joseph Stalin lying in state, attended by Vyacheslav Molotov, Kliment Voroshilov, Lavrenty Beria, and Georgii Malenkov, Moscow, March 8, 1953

There seems to be an insatiable appetite for biographies of Stalin. The catalog of Harvard University’s library lists 690, 203 of them published since the year 2000. Although Stalin plays a central part in Sheila Fitzpatrick’s latest book, this is not a biography but something more unusual: a story of the circle or “team” of which he was the leader but on which he was also dependent. She calls Stalin “the lynchpin” and stresses that the team members helped him run the country of which, after 1928, he was the undisputed leader. Yet he relied on them not only politically but also emotionally, especially in his later years. To reveal this mutual dependence is a major contribution of this innovative book.

Sheila Fitzpatrick is a native of Australia and the child of Brian Fitzpatrick, a radical writer of the “fellow traveler” school whose portrait she provided in *My Father’s Daughter* (2010).

Although she obviously absorbed some of his radicalism, in time she distanced herself from him and his world outlook. She left her native land to attend Oxford University, where in 1969 she received a doctorate from St. Antony's College. Ultimately, she ended up in the United States, where she taught Soviet history at the University of Chicago. She returned to Australia after a fifty-year absence. She is the author of numerous books, virtually all of them dealing with the Soviet Union.

Fitzpatrick belongs to the school of historians of the USSR known as "revisionists." This school tends to emphasize the complexity of the Soviet regime, rejecting as simplistic the concept of "totalitarianism." It stresses social history at the expense of politics. The totalitarian concept was first formulated in Fascist Italy in the early 1920s: Mussolini defined it as "everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state." Neither Mussolini nor Hitler established truly totalitarian regimes because both retained private property, which limited the power of the state. The founder of the first totalitarian state was Stalin, who nationalized all of the country's economic resources, be they land or industry. Revisionists have made some valuable contributions to the understanding of Soviet history, but they have tended to underestimate its horrors.

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On Stalin's Team is an important book because it modifies the prevalent view of Joseph Stalin as a lone dictator and his staff as flunkies who merely carried out his orders. It shows, in fact, Stalin's dictatorship was something of a collegiate arrangement in which the dictator had the ultimate power to appoint his staff and take or reject its advice. Yet, Fitzpatrick writes, "they couldn't have done it without him. But the corollary is also true: he couldn't have done it without them." In her conclusion, Fitzpatrick refers to the totalitarian model:

Based on observation of similarities between mid-twentieth-century fascist regimes and the Soviet regime under Stalin, the totalitarian model posited a regime headed by a charismatic leader, ruling through a mobilizing party aspiration and a secret police force, and aspiring to total control over society. Much ink has been spilled, including by me, on the applicability of this model to Soviet history. As far as the present study is concerned, however, the model's relevance is quite limited, as it never focused on Stalin's relationship with his closest advisors or attached particular importance to it.

This kind of "revisionism" is persuasive. In my opinion it does not invalidate the totalitarian concept nor does it, as the Princeton University Press blurb claims, puts "an entirely new picture of Stalin within its milieu." But it does add a new dimension to the totalitarian model. As such, Sheila Fitzpatrick's book is to be warmly welcomed.

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