

THE DEATH OF STALIN. By *Georges Bortoli*. Translated from the French by *Raymond Rosenthal*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975. viii, 214 pp. + 16 pp. photographs. \$8.95.

This is an original and useful book, which comprehensively portrays Soviet life during the five months from the Nineteenth Party Congress to Stalin's death in March 1953. Although the focus of the study is the dramatic events of those months—the Congress itself, the infamous Doctors' Trial, Stalin's death and funeral, and the ensuing power struggle, the book also reviews the condition of all classes of the population (peasants, workers, managers, government and party leaders), the economy, religious life, the status of the national minorities (especially the Jews), and special features of Stalinism such as the leader mythology, the slave labor system, intellectual regimentation, and the curious imperialist-messianic role of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe and in the world Communist movement. The epilogue comments briefly on the early beginnings of de-Stalinization and concludes with thoughtful judgments on the Stalin legacy.

The book contains little information—though probably a number of insights—that will be new to specialists. Nonetheless, scholars can certainly admire the vigor and skill, as well as the factual and interpretative reliability of the presentation, which is highly effective in re-creating both the flavor and substance of the late Stalin era. This is “popularization,” to be sure: the specialist will find a few factual errors and awkward translations, and will feel uneasy with extensive quotations from unidentified Soviet citizens. But he will also find himself recommending the work to friends and students as a brief and lively presentation of the Stalin system.

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ALEXANDER DOLGUN'S STORY: AN AMERICAN IN THE GULAG. By *Alexander Dolgun*, with *Patrick Watson*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975. viii, 370 pp. \$10.00.

Alexander Dolgun's Story alternates between passages of horror and scenes which can only be described as a Soviet-style “Hogan's Heroes.” Dolgun (an American citizen “chief clerking” in the American embassy in Moscow, who was arrested in 1948, released from Gulag in 1956, and allowed to leave the USSR in 1971) survived the worst of Stalin's prisons, in part by playing teasing games with his interrogators. He later became an expert at *tufta*, the charade of work-faking on which survival in the camps depended. His story contains moments of political and philosophical reflection (on the way the very illegitimacy of the MGB seemed to give it authority, and on the moral imperative to survive with decency), but perhaps most interesting is the implicit lesson to be learned from the volume—that Stalinism is farce as well as tragedy.

Do you picture Gulag interrogators as total cynics who, aware of their victims' innocence, nonetheless shuffled them along to extermination? Dolgun suggests that his tormentors sincerely believed in his guilt, and, therefore, endured infuriating frustration trying to “prove” their case. The problem was that the confessions they extracted were, of course, false, and thus arbitrary and inconsistent. Yet, in a mad parody of efficiency, the bureaucratic machine insisted that full and consistent documentation be provided.