

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.

Do you imagine the camps as places where life and death depended on the whim of brutal guards? Dolgun shows that this was partially true, but he also demonstrates that the camps, too, went by the book—which allowed not only merciless barbarity but also, in the interstices of the regulations, respite and relief. For example, one rule was that persons with a fever of more than 38 degrees centigrade were to be hospitalized and, miraculously, they sometimes were—out of fear that “someday a bureaucrat who wants to find fault with another bureaucrat may investigate . . .” (p. 184).

After Stalin’s death, life in the camps eased to the point that everyone—guards as well as prisoners—practiced *tufta*. And the same pattern awaited Dolgun after liberation from the camps; for example, in Moscow he prepared for political education meetings by plagiarizing pages of Lenin or Brezhnev with only minor word changes—thereby satisfying instructors, who wanted only a prescribed amount of handwritten pages in order to satisfy regulations.

Saul Maloff (*New York Times Book Review*, May 25, 1975) concluded that “Dolgun has little to add to the historical record or to prison lore.” Apart from being downright inhospitable, this judgment is wrong. Dolgun is no Solzhenitsyn, nor even a Evgeniia Ginsburg. But we owe him both our admiration, and our appreciation for reminding us that Stalinism has been not only savage, but absurd.

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THE EDUCATION OF LEV NAVROZOV: A LIFE IN THE CLOSED WORLD ONCE CALLED RUSSIA. By *Lev Navrozov*. New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, Harper & Row, 1975. x, 628 pp. \$12.95.

Lev Navrozov was born in the Soviet Union in 1928 and followed a career as a translator of literature. He emigrated from Russia to the West, smuggling out, on microfilm, a cycle of works that he had been writing secretly for over twenty years.

This book purports to re-create the life of an individual in Soviet society. Unfortunately it does nothing of the sort. Even for experts on the Soviet Union it is difficult to follow the text, which is formless and jumps arbitrarily from one topic to another and from one period of Soviet history to another. The style does not help. Written like a chatty serial in a clever, superficial style, the book is full of allusions but lacks any depth. There may be a few interesting details concerning the personal life of Navrozov embedded in the marsh, but they appear as will-o’-the-wisps.

The book is dressed up with scholarly looking source notes and a full index, but even these cannot clarify the text—for example, the index ranges from *Capone, Alphonse* (“*Scarface Al*”) to *Shakespeare, William*. There is certainly a crying need for personal accounts of social and political life in the Soviet Union since the 1930s, and a book like Evgeniia Ginzburg’s *Into The Whirlwind* is invaluable in this way. Sadly, the work under review bears no comparison to Ginzburg’s account.

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