

Stalin the Kremlin Mountaineer

Paul Johnson

A valuable short biography of a 20th-century monster

This is a brief book – a one-day read, 58 print pages. It contains the estimate essential biographical information one needs.

A lot must be sacrificed in such a brief recounting of a man's lifetime. The book does not provide a great deal of historical context. The reader needs to be reasonably familiar with czarist Russia, Nazi Germany, and the first and second world wars, because Johnson simply does not budget pages to provide the background.

The writing is superb, as one expects from Paul Johnson. The book flows easily and logically. It touches on the appropriate major themes: the Bolshevik revolution, consolidation of power under Lenin, forced collectivization and the Holodomor, the purges, Stalin's indecisive dealings with Germany and failure to prepare for the war, the beginning of the Cold War period, and his deteriorating health, increasing paranoia, and death.

I learned from the book that Lenin was the first to use systematic terror and liquidations to consolidate his power. Stalin merely improved on proven methods. Stalin's great gift was his tremendous appetite for work in his methodical execution of schemes to keep his opponents, real or imagined, always off-balance.

The very brevity of this book makes it accessible to people who need to read it, people coming of age in the 21st century. Several historians are drawing parallels between this era and that of a century ago, the last days of the Tzar, World War I, a cataclysmic war which destroyed three empires and significantly rearranged the world power structure. Significantly, the century's three worst despots, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, got their start in these chaotic times. If we are again facing chaos, it is good to know what can possibly ensue.