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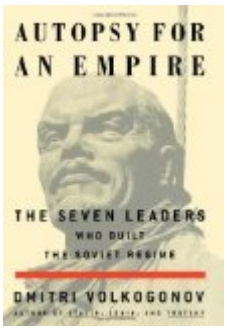
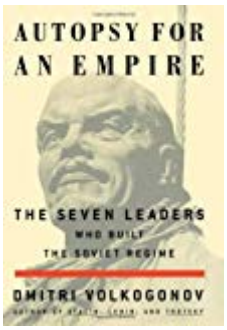


Martin McCauley. *Gorbachev (Profiles in Power).* London: Longman, 1998. xvi + 343 pp. $103.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-582-21597-9.



Dmitry Volkogonov. *Autopsy for an Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime.* New York and London: The Free Press, 1998. xxvii + 572 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-684-83420-7.

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Despite a rigorous revisionist focus on history "from below," political biography continues to be a popular medium for historical analysis within the field of Soviet history. Certainly, the validity of biographical approaches in the Soviet context is hardly questionable. Individual political leaders did play an inordinately large role in shaping Soviet history. This was perhaps inevitable, given the top-heavy nature of the centralized, bureaucratic system and a political culture that looked less to mass participation in politics than to one-man or oligarchical decision-making. Biography has long been one of the more accessible approaches, since for many years it was the party leaders who were the most visible representatives of the Soviet system, at least for Westerners. Moreover, the personal qualities--the charisma, forcefulness, ruthlessness, and even charm--of particular Soviet leaders have made them compelling subjects for analysis.

It is in fact biographical analysis that lies at the heart of two recently published studies on Soviet history, one by a distinguished and accomplished scholar of Soviet politics and history, Martin McCauley, and the other by the now deceased Russian historian, Dmitry Volkogonov, a three-star general and one-time head of the Soviet army's Political Administration. Both McCauley and Volkogonov use biography as a framework for examining and understanding the particular dynamics of Soviet history. McCauley's *Gorbachev* is a political biography that interweaves personal

analysis of the last Soviet leader into a chronological narrative of perestroika from 1985 to 1991. Volkogonov's ***Autopsy for an Empire*** is more ambitious, consisting of a series of personal sketches of seven Soviet leaders from Lenin to Gorbachev, through which he seeks to onceptualize and critique the entire Soviet experience. Each of these books makes a definite contribution to Soviet studies, revealing both the advantages as well as the limitations of the biographical genre.

Autopsy for an Empire is Volkogonov's last work, written while fighting the cancer that finally took his life in December of 1995. It stands as his final attempt to depict and evaluate the full scope of Soviet history and those individuals who dominated its stage. Volkogonov must be considered a pioneer in biographical studies in the former Soviet Union. He was one of the first to use biography as an analytical tool rather than simply as a form of political hagiography and propaganda. He created a sensation in 1989 when he published the first modern Soviet biography of Stalin, followed by highly controversial works on Trotsky and Lenin. As a top military propagandist, then head of the Institute of Military History, and finally chief of the commission established under Yeltsin to declassify state and Communist Party papers, Volkogonov enjoyed exclusive access to top secret Politburo and military archives, materials which formed much of the basis for his biographies, including ***Autopsy for an Empire*** .

The significance of Volkogonov's epic study is principally threefold. First, it is a critical analysis from the perspective of an insider, himself a functioning cog in the middle and upper ranks of the Soviet apparatus, who knew the internal workings of the system he describes. He may not have hobnobbed on a regular basis with the top leadership, but he worked directly under them and shared their same basic milieu. Therefore, the narrative is punctuated with priceless personal comments, innuendos, anecdotes and stories based on his own experiences and observations within that system. His access to information and to proceedings that were closed to public purview gives him a unique vantage point from which to describe and assess the Soviet system. This is a perspective that in the past was rarely accessible to Western audiences. Furthermore, the archival access he enjoyed was indeed rare and perhaps unequaled among modern scholars; the references alone are invaluable. He has brought to scholarly attention countless documents and materials which otherwise may have never seen the light of day.

Second, this is Soviet history through the eyes of a Russian scholar, bringing us a vantage point and a perspective which is sadly lacking in current Western historiography. Only recently has it become possible for Russian historians to have their work published in the West, and regardless of how one may evaluate the quality of the scholarship, this trend is to be applauded and encouraged. It is also representative of the growing Russian interest in biographical studies, which is in itself an important development to examine.

Third, this book is a fascinating window into the post-Soviet mindset of a disillusioned former Communist, an ex-true believer turned hardened and sharply embittered critic. In addition to being a series of biographical vignettes of Soviet leaders, it is actually an intellectual biography of Volkogonov himself, perhaps revealing more about the author than about Soviet history. It is illuminating to follow Volkogonov through this re-evaluation of his past and the former idols of his order. Through it, he seems to be trying to come to terms with his own life and his longtime loyalty to a system he had eventually come to see as corrupt, vicious, and amoral.

Emerging from the pages of ***Anatomy of an Empire*** is evidence of painful self-reflection, along with deep anger and frustration over a lifetime of fruitless sacrifices, both material and intellectual. In some ways, this work can be compared to Alexander Yakovlev's ***The Fate of Marxism in Rus-***

sia, which also stands as a scathing indictment of Marxism and the Soviet system from one who had spent long years serving those same monoliths. While Yakovlev took a more philosophical approach, Volkogonov has chosen history as his principal avenue for attack. Volkogonov's caustic exposure, criticism and condemnation of Soviet history and its leading representatives is a form of mental revenge against a system which he felt had violated not only his own trust and integrity but that of his countrymen.

With regard to Lenin and Stalin, this last work of Volkogonov adds little to his earlier full-length biographies. He does, however, more closely and emphatically link the first two Soviet leaders than he did in his earlier studies. His chapter on Lenin is basically devoted to citing evidence implicating Lenin as the father of Stalinism and Soviet totalitarianism. There is also more material on World War II, particularly regarding Stalin's defense policy and foreign relations, than in his previous work. In addition, Volkogonov gives new details on Stalin's interactions with the North Korean and Chinese leadership (especially intriguing are the conversations Volkogonov relates between Stalin and Mao, p. 138) and titillates the reader with quotes from Stalin's doodling at Politburo meetings (apparently Stalin liked to draw weird, shapeless animals, some of which resembled wolves, pp. 142-144).

Where Volkogonov breaks new ground is in his chapters on the post-Stalinist leadership. While Volkogonov is equally critical of the last Soviet leaders, viewing them as accomplices with Lenin and Stalin in the violation of human rights and decency, he nonetheless brings them to life as human beings. He particularly lends humanity to the figures of Brezhnev and Chernenko, about whom few personal details have ever been known. Volkogonov even appears to have a certain compassion and respect for the likes of Khrushchev, Andropov, and Gorbachev. He regards each as true believers of Marxism-Leninism who genuinely sought to improve the Soviet system. His descriptions in this section are unquestionably invaluable. Here he was dealing with events, issues, and people that were deeply intertwined with his own life and work.

Consequently, Volkogonov is able to take the reader into the very corridors of Soviet power to witness the behind-the-scenes wrangling and maneuvering, the deception as well as the idealism that drove the Soviet system. He reveals his disillusionment with that same system as he met Soviet-supported foreign communist leaders who seemed to him to be increasingly amoral and repugnant. His critical analysis is at its sharpest when he poignantly exposes the tragic inanity of the top-heavy and overly centralized Soviet system. He scornfully describes Soviet elites immersing themselves in trivial details rather than attending to serious problems in the economy and society. He notes that the same Politburo which refused to discuss the stalled economy, the consumer shortages, or the implication of having to export forty-six million tons of grain would spend hours discussing what medals to bestow or what gifts to give a North Korean delegation (p. 405).

The most sympathetic portrayal in Volkogonov's gallery is that of Gorbachev. Volkogonov calls him a principled statesman and humanitarian, and he praises Gorbachev's salutary influence on world politics as well as his initiation of glasnost (pp. 506-507). But, consistent with his overall assessment of the Soviet regime, which he sees as fatally doomed by its Marxist origins, Volkogonov sees Gorbachev's downfall as inevitable because he was deeply committed to preserving the Marxist-Leninist foundations of the Soviet state. According to Volkogonov, Gorbachev sabotaged his own reform program by thinking that a communist system could sustain liberal changes without imploding from within. Gorbachev was blind to the contradictions inherent in his attempt to introduce multi-party politics and market economics into a Leninist-based system. Volkogonov

clearly rejects any interpretation of Gorbachev as an embryonic social democrat.

The author continually laments Gorbachev's devotion to Lenin and the Communist Party, which in Volkogonov's view obscured Gorbachev's capacity to formulate an effective long-term program of change. Furthermore, Volkogonov brings out evidence of Gorbachev's confusion over the reassessment of Stalin. He cites several moments in 1986 and 1987 where Gorbachev defended Stalin or revealed his own ambivalence concerning the Stalinist heritage. He points out that Gorbachev, determined to subordinate this group to the Party, placed obstructions in the path of the anti-Stalinist organization Memorial. Yet Volkogonov himself seems uncertain about Gorbachev, which he acknowledges and attributes to the fact that he is trying to assess a living human being whose legacy is yet unclear. At times Volkogonov seems to contradict himself concerning Gorbachev's identity as a leader. One moment he praises Gorbachev for his progressive and innovative spirit as a communist leader, but the next he condemns him for being overly conservative and close-minded. Volkogonov does not want to give Gorbachev credit because he failed to go far enough in his own mental transformation, yet at the same time Volkogonov remains awed at what Gorbachev did accomplish.

The last Soviet leader also figures as a sympathetic but fatally flawed leader in Martin McCauley's *Gorbachev*. For McCauley, the phenomenon of Gorbachev is exceptionally intriguing--a failure who changed the world, who did the unthinkable, but whose weaknesses undermined his strengths. As McCauley describes him, Gorbachev was a man who had the foresight to see the writing on the wall, but could not himself compose a new script. In contrast to Volkogonov, though, McCauley does not blame Gorbachev's Marxist-Leninist mindset. Instead McCauley emphasizes Gorbachev's lack of vision and poor political judgments, which led to flawed policies, particularly in the sphere of economic reform and the nationalities.

In McCauley's view, Gorbachev did move beyond Leninism and by 1989 was clearly espousing principles of Western social democracy. But Gorbachev lacked any "clear strategic vision of where he was going" (p. 161). He preferred to rely on tactical, short-term maneuvering rather than on long-term strategic planning. Yet, McCauley remonstrates, even Gorbachev's tactics were marred by a potentially dangerous flaw. He could not tolerate personal criticism, nor did he like anyone to eclipse him in the public arena. He had enormous self-confidence, which kept him pushing forward but which also made him arrogant and unwilling to listen to others.

Such weaknesses in character interfered with his rational political judgment, particularly in regard to the radical democratic opposition. Gorbachev bristled in the face of their increasingly harsh criticisms of his reforms as well as of his leadership. He feared the charisma and popular appeal of Yeltsin and the left. Consequently, he moved away from those who should have been his natural allies. Instead he courted party and state conservatives, and fatally miscalculated his ability to counterbalance the growing extremists on both right and left to forge a middle way between capitalism and communism. McCauley also faults Gorbachev for his handling of nationality issues, particularly in the Baltics, and his continued blindness to the seriousness of rising ethnonationalism in the republics.

McCauley's biography is a generalized study that does not break new ground in its assessment of Gorbachev. It is primarily a synthesis of selected secondary and memoir literature and is aimed at university students as well as at general readers. It was commissioned as part of a larger series entitled *Profiles in Power*, which includes biographies of other world leaders. Thus, McCauley is not looking to shake up Western historiography with fresh new research and innovative interpre-

tations, but is mainly concerned with providing a general portrait of Gorbachev and his times for a non-specialized audience. He also uses this biography as a forum for his own personal assessments of Gorbachev, Soviet history and politics, much in the same way that Volkogonov does in *Anatomy of an Empire*, though on a smaller scale. At times the narrative becomes a virtual dialogue between author and reader, with McCauley sharing the vast insight he has accumulated over many years of study of the former Soviet Union.

Both books are valued contributions to current historical literature. Each offers perspectives into key Soviet leaders which are insightful and will help to stimulate further debate and discussion. The personal touches and insights make each of these works worth reading, whether one is a longtime specialist or a novice just beginning a journey into the Soviet past. But what makes each work valuable also makes each work problematic. While both books are based on years of accumulated research, neither constitutes a scholarly monograph. Both are more descriptive than analytical, and more general than may be desired by specialists in Soviet studies.

Anatomy of an Empire is a particularly personalized and subjective interpretation of Soviet history. It is an indictment of the Soviet past, not a balanced investigation and consideration of Soviet historical development. It is thoroughly documented, and much of the commentary is backed by references to Soviet archives. Yet the historical evidence presented is usually taken entirely out of context, and with little attempt to assess the entire picture. Volkogonov is basically focused on publishing material that backs up his pre-determined conceptualization of the Soviet past--that it was a terrible tragedy stemming both from inherent flaws in Marxist doctrine and from the fanatic intolerance and ruthlessness of Lenin, Stalin, and their political heirs. Too often Volkogonov's work degenerates into a polemical diatribe. He is determined to justify his rejection of the Soviet system as brutal and inhuman, based entirely on violence and led by individuals who, with the possible exception of Gorbachev, were cruel, smug, self-interested, and essentially blind to any sense of humanity. In doing so, Volkogonov gravely simplifies the historical complexities of the Soviet past and the many factors involved in the dynamics of its development.

Volkogonov's style and approach is essentially that of the Soviet propagandist he once was. He makes simplistic points over and over again. What was once all white is now all black. The contents are driven by the desired effect. This is why *Anatomy of an Empire* is perhaps more valuable as an example of post-Communist political consciousness and angst than as a strict history text. Of course, those who agree with Volkogonov's assessment of the Soviet past will undoubtedly hail this book as illuminating, convincing and courageous. But those who do not see history in formulaic or fatalistic terms will find it frustrating if not disappointing. Ultimately he has little answer for the question of what drove the Soviet system, what made it work at so many levels, and why people remained loyal to a system that was excessively violent and corrupt. Unfortunately, he does not even explore in depth his own psyche, particularly what kept him going despite the doubts and disillusionment which according to him, began to arise early in the post-Stalinist period.

Volkogonov's treatment of Gorbachev is perhaps the most balanced, and certainly his conclusions about Gorbachev's continued adherence to Marxism-Leninism are shared by a number of scholars, including this reviewer. But even here Volkogonov does not truly investigate this mindset and what it meant on a day-to-day basis, in terms of actual policy. He presents the assessment and then backs it up with references to Gorbachev's statements, but Volkogonov does not truly study his actions and concrete decisions in light of this mentality.

Despite the criticisms noted here, Volkogonov's book should be considered for college reading lists, especially in courses on Russian and Soviet intellectual history. It may be more appropriate, however, for advanced undergraduate and graduate students than for students in survey and introductory-level courses. Undergraduates will appreciate its personal anecdotes and insights, but may find it hard to retain much information from it, given the rambling nature and loose structure of the narrative. The individual biographies tend to move from one point to another in a stream of consciousness, with little internal organization. There are chapter sub-headings, but they are not particularly useful. Unfortunately, the book's structure clearly suffers from the fact that it was unfinished and that the author was fatally ill while writing it.

Compared to Volkogonov's work, McCauley's *Gorbachev* offers a more detailed and balanced examination of Soviet history and Gorbachev in particular. McCauley does get into the nuts and bolts of political policy-making and analyzes Gorbachev's political behavior. But McCauley's work is also disappointing in the lack of depth and the limited scope of its analysis. It is too general to be truly satisfying as a study of the final Soviet leader. One cannot help but wish that McCauley would indeed do an extensive examination of Gorbachev based on his own research rather than merely cull together recent insights given by others.

Furthermore, as biography the book is disappointing. At times it seems to be focused more on perestroika than on Gorbachev himself. The emphasis is on politics, economics, and foreign policy, with Gorbachev simply serving as the common denominator linking them together. There is one chapter on Gorbachev's life story, but beyond that the primary orientation is the period from 1985 to 1991. From time to time McCauley does break the narrative and consider Gorbachev as an individual. But if one is looking for a more personal analysis, this is not the biography to read. It is about Gorbachev as politician, economist, and foreign policy negotiator, and only rarely offers glimpses into the interior of this enigmatic personality.

However, the general nature of McCauley's *Gorbachev* and its detailed chronological narrative of political and economic developments during the perestroika period make it a useful text for college courses on Soviet history and politics, or for a course on twentieth-century history. McCauley provides valuable appendices tailor-made for students: a glossary of terms and abbreviations, a chronology of the perestroika period, brief biographies of Soviet figures discussed in the book, and a bibliographical essay. In addition, he provides an explanatory note on Russian names, two maps, and a chart outlining the dual Party-government structures (pp. ii-xiii) His discussions of Lenin and his interpretation of Marxism, as well as the differences between socialism and communism, are especially cogent and useful for teaching these concepts to students lacking background in political theory.

Both books reveal the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the biographical approach. The stories of individuals are what personalize history and make it understandable and relevant. History is the collective result of individuals living and working and making decisions. The individual is the basic building block of historical movements. Figures like Lenin, Stalin and Gorbachev did succeed in gaining the degree of power that allowed their personal characteristics to become historical forces in their own right. Both books help to illuminate how these processes transpired in the former Soviet Union. But it is difficult in a biography to do justice to the larger context; too often the dimension of interaction with the larger historical factors and forces is diminished. One can look at the lives of certain individuals as mirrors of the larger society, but when the discussion turns to cause and effect, to the role of individuals in shaping a society and in determining historical devel-

opment, then the issue becomes more problematic.

Biographies are important steps towards deeper understanding of historical processes, but they are rarely the whole picture, no matter how gifted the author or how interesting the subject. In the case of Volkogonov's work, it is highly questionable whether one can conceptualize or explain the entire dynamics of a society's historical development through the stories of seven individuals, no matter how much power they wielded. Nor can one truly understand perestroika simply by looking at Gorbachev's role. McCauley more effectively than Volkogonov examines his subject in the context of Soviet history, but nonetheless does not fully analyze the interaction between the individual leader and the larger forces shaping events during the last years of the Soviet Union.

As many have argued, difficult and painstaking though it may be, the search for understanding the tragedies as well as the triumphs in Soviet history must begin below, not just from the top. Biography cannot be the whole story. It must be a stepping stone to a broader, more panoramic examination of Soviet reality, from the person at the top who wielded the power to the person at the bottom who may or may not have carried out the will and design of the leadership. Despite the overuse of force, Soviet leaders could not have enjoyed their power without the complicity of others, and this dynamic is yet to be fully understood. All of the different threads must be put together before we can begin to understand the day-to-day reality of the Soviet system, how it functioned as long as it did, and why it did not survive the twentieth century.

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