Chapter Thirty-Seven

How Not to Write About Stalin¹

A Review of Svetlana Alliluyeva, Twenty Letters to a Friend

Miss Stalin both demonstrates and helps to perpetuate one of the myths of the modern world: the belief that the explanation of what is puzzling on the public stage lies in the realm of private life. There is a small grain of truth here. Sometimes a man’s relations with his wife or friends may suggest a new light in which to see his actions as a revolutionary or a statesman. But, in general, what is crucial in the relationship of private to public life is the irrelevance of the one to the other. That Himmler detested cruelty to animals does nothing to explain the politics of the Final Solution. Miss Stalin’s revelation that her father was exceptionally good at handling domestic servants is quite as uninteresting, and obviously so. Less obvious and therefore more dangerous is the suggestion that two of Stalin’s personal relationships may explain at least in part the development and character of his tyranny.

The first of Miss Stalin’s suggestions is that her mother’s suicide may have played a decisive role in Stalin’s development.

What was the effect of my mother’s death? Did it simply leave my father free to do what he would have done in any case? Or was it that her suicide broke his spirit and made him lose his faith in all his old friends?2

The second suggestion is that the author of the essential evil in Stalin’s career was Beria. Kirov’s murder, for example, so Miss Stalin says, was far more probably the work of Beria than of Stalin. The two suggestions are linked, for Beria’s ascendancy followed, on Miss Stalin’s interpretation, the death of her mother. It is true that she claims that she is not trying to shift blame from Stalin to Beria: none the less she writes that ‘the spell cast on my father by this terrifying evil genius was extremely powerful, and it never failed to work’.3

Her metaphor is at once revealing and inapposite. Everything we know about Stalin makes the notion of him as somehow spell-bound extremely unconvincing. But Miss Stalin has no other terms in which to think of her father. In particular, she seems incapable of thinking in political terms. Hence those of Stalin’s political actions which impinged upon her – the imprisonment of Alexander Svanidze or that of Polina Molotov – appear in her narrative as arbitrary and unrelated actions. This appearance of arbitrariness infects even her account of her mother’s suicide. She says of her mother’s suicide note that she has been told by those who saw it that ‘it was a terrible letter, full of reproaches and accusations: It wasn’t purely personal; it was partly political as well’.4 But, either she does not know, or she is unwilling to say what the political content of the note was. Her comments are as follows:

People shot themselves fairly often in those days. Trotskyism had been defeated. Collectivization of the farms had just gotten under way. The Party was torn by opposition and factional strife. One leading Party member after another did away with himself. Mayakovsky had shot himself only a short time before. People couldn’t make sense of this, and the memory was still very fresh. I think all this couldn’t fail to have had its effect on my mother,

2 Alliluyeva 1968, p. 125.
4 Alliluyeva 1968, p. 102.