RONALD GRIGOR SUNY (Ann Arbor, MI, U.S.A.)

MAKING SENSE OF STALIN: SOME RECENT AND NOT-SO-RECENT BIOGRAPHIES

What is exceptional about the life of an exceptional individual is the location of that life in a particular historically organized milieu and the interactional patterning of the series of experiences through which individuation is then achieved—in fact, the meshing of life-history and social history in a singular fate. Individual lives are indeed unique but their uniqueness, I suggest, is not a matter of some elusively private personal factors but of the diversity of movement available to historically located individuals within historically located social worlds... The problem of the individual can, I conclude, be made manageable in historical sociology by treating it as itself genuinely a problem of history.1

The lasting fascination that the figure of Stalin holds for scholars and journalists alike is matched in the historical literature by a seemingly irresistible temptation to make his early life "useful" by investing it with a psychological depth that, unfortunately, the fragmentary sources hardly provide. As the subject of more than thirty biographies, the young Stalin is usually treated as a prefiguration of the mature ruler of the Soviet Union, that central riddle within the enigma that is the true object of inquiry of most investigators. Though less crude than those familiar childhood accounts on which many of us broke our historical teeth—"Christopher Columbus, Boy Explorer," "Florence Nightengale, Girl Nurse," "John Wanamaker, Boy Merchant"—the first chapters of the various lives of Stalin are an almost ritualistic search for signs of the paranoid revolutionary-from-above of the 1930s. Indeed, what has happened is that historians who "know" the autocratic Stalin of totalitarian Russia have read back the characteristics of the General Secretary into the young Stalin, emphasizing what fits (violence, paranoia, arrogance and the need to dominate) and rejecting what does not (romanticism, literary sensibility, love for his homeland, revolutionary idealism). As important as the early life of Stalin was to the formation of his personality, the difficulties of reconstructing it from the few extant memoirs of his youth and the scanty documentation that have come down to us have led sometimes to flimsily-built psychoanalytic speculation and at other times to

fanciful arguments that Stalin must have been an agent for the tsar's Okhrana.2

The telling of Stalin's life story has almost without exception been a battleground for attack or defense of the Soviet experience. Even today as the heirs and victims of Stalin within the Soviet Union try to come to terms with his legacy, the irrepressible impulse has been to use whatever tale or rumor may illuminate the dark corners of the recent past, whether or not such fascinating details may meet the usual standards of historical evidence. The imaginative portraits by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Vasilii Grossman, or Anatolii Rybakov doubtlessly help us to sense what the mind of the dictator might have been like.3 But these are known to be fictions or at best half-fictions. Glasnost' promises a rich harvest of memoirs and fresh sources on the Stalin years. Yet the current political thrust of perestroika, laudable as it is, has placed historical imagination in service to a specific politics of eroding the Stalinist inheritance. A less engaged treatment of Stalin seems almost disloyal to the exciting challenges of democratization and the "new thinking." An ironic coincidence between the recent "discoveries" of the latest Soviet investigators and the most critical and unsympathetic Western accounts has brought a schadenfreude to conservatives in the West and an uncertainty to those who in the past were more equivocal about Communist rule in Russia.

Where Stalin is concerned, the need to know has very often taken precedence over what we can know. For all the extraordinary revelations about his years in power, the fruits of glasnost' have not yet helped much to fill in the outlines of Stalin as a personality, particularly in his prerevolutionary years. Methodologically, Stalin biographers have divided between a majority restrained by traditional approaches to evidence and unwilling to engage in attenuated interpretations and a bolder minority ready to borrow from the arsenal of psychoanalysis to find the hidden meanings beneath Stalin's actions and utterances.

After many embattled years, psychohistory has been admitted, reluctantly by many, to the academic discipline of history. Yet even with two major scholarly journals and a host of monographs written from this perspective, psychohistorians exist in a penumbra, on the fringes of respectability, suspect in the minds of mainstream practitioners, and refused the respectful acceptance granted to social historians informed by cultural anthropology or feminist

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