



## Stalin and His Hangmen: The Tyrant and Those Who Killed for Him

By Donald Rayfield

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Stalin did not act alone. The mass executions, the mock trials, the betrayals and purges, the jailings and secret torture that ravaged the Soviet Union during the three decades of Stalin's dictatorship, were the result of a tight network of trusted henchmen (and women), spies, psychopaths, and thugs. At the top of this pyramid of terror sat five indispensable hangmen who presided over the various incarnations of Stalin's secret police. Now, in his harrowing new book, Donald Rayfield probes the lives, the minds, the twisted careers, and the unpunished crimes of Stalin's loyal assassins.

Founded by Feliks Dzierzynski, the Cheka—the Extraordinary Commission—came to life in the first years of the Russian Revolution. Spreading fear in a time of chaos, the Cheka proved a perfect instrument for Stalin's ruthless consolidation of power. But brutal as it was, the Cheka under Dzierzynski was amateurish compared to the well-oiled killing machines that succeeded it. Genrikh Iagoda's OGPU specialized in political assassination, propaganda, and the manipulation of foreign intellectuals. Later, the NKVD recruited a new generation of torturers. Starting in 1938, terror mastermind Lavrenti Beria brought violent repression to a new height of ingenuity and sadism.

As Rayfield shows, Stalin and his henchmen worked relentlessly to coerce and suborn leading Soviet intellectuals, artists, writers, lawyers, and scientists. Maxim Gorky, Aleksandr Fadeev, Alexei Tolstoi, Isaak Babel, and Osip Mandelstam were all caught in Stalin's web—courted, toyed with, betrayed, and then ruthlessly destroyed. In bringing to light the careers, personalities, relationships, and “accomplishments” of Stalin's key henchmen and their most prominent victims, Rayfield creates a chilling drama of the intersection of political fanaticism, personal vulnerability, and blind lust for power spanning half a century.

Though Beria lost his power—and his life—after Stalin's death in 1953, the fundamental methods of the hangmen maintained their grip into the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Rayfield argues, the tradition of terror, far from disappearing, has emerged with renewed vitality under Vladimir Putin. Written

with grace, passion, and a dazzling command of the intricacies of Soviet politics and society, *Stalin and the Hangmen* is a devastating indictment of the individuals and ideology that kept Stalin in power.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

This investigation of Stalin and his coterie is at its best when it focuses on the latter—henchmen such as Feliks Dzierzynski, Viacheslav Molotov and Lavrenti Beria—showing that it was their "spellbound submission" that made it possible for tens of millions of Soviet citizens to be killed, while the account adds nuance to our understanding of how the brutality of the U.S.S.R. was possible. As Rayfield (*Anton Chekhov*), a professor of Russian and Georgian at the University of London, shows, the leaders Stalin appointed also needed no direct instructions to turn their hands to violence; Beria, for instance, who took over the secret police in 1938, was a "vindictive sadist" who combined "unscrupulousness" with "finesse." Rayfield focuses less than Moses Montefiore in his recent biography of Stalin on the personal lives of top Soviet officials, and more on their policies. When Rayfield concentrates on Stalin, however, while some of the details are new, the picture overall is familiar. By focusing on Stalin's tactics and network of violent underbosses, though, Rayfield makes an important argument: discussions of Stalin's ideology should be secondary to the brutal means he used to remain in power for 30 years. 32 pages of photos, maps, not seen by *PW*.

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#### From the Inside Flap

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About the Author

Donald Rayfield is professor of Russian and Georgian at the University of London and the author of a number of books on Russian writers and intellectuals, including an acclaimed biography of Anton Chekhov.

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