

Koba

Amber V. Crosson

12/10/2012

A Tyrant and his Idol

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that a person's childhood experiences can have lasting impact on his adult life.¹ In the case of Joseph Stalin, much energy has been devoted to discussing the possibility of a personality disorder stemming from his conflicted childhood. Given the circumstances surrounding his family, during his upbringing in the town of Gori, it makes sense that his parents could be so divided on his upbringing. His father Beso, expecting Joseph to lead a stable, working class life as he did, would expect the certainty of a steady wage during hard times. His mother, Keke, hoped that he could leave the current conditions, for a better life than that found in their poor home. It is understandable, though no less reprehensible, that his childhood was very harsh.

2

Little work has been done, however, on the effect of Joseph Dzhugashvili's favorite book, which he read during his teenage years at seminary school. He was so inspired by Alexander Kazbegi's *The Patricide*, that he insisted on being called Koba, after one of the valiant characters of the book, for nearly twenty years. As a childhood friend, Joseph Iremashvili has mentioned, "the subject of [Stalin's] dreams was Koba...He would become the second Koba, a fighter and a hero." ³

Given that there are no copies of this novel available in English, it is reasonable to assume that any description of the plot is, in the very best of cases, a summary of a translation of a summary. Because of this, many synopses are inaccurate, or more commonly, misrepresentative of the story line, retelling minor details as major plot elements. The worst offender is quite possibly Montefiore, who in *Young Stalin* describes how Koba "fights against the Russians, sacrificing

¹"Teenage Brains Are Malleable And Vulnerable, Researchers Say" (<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2012/10/16/162997951/teenage-brains-are-malleable-and-vulnerable-researchers-say>) An NPR reporter discusses the difference between adolescent and adult brains with a child psychiatrist. Jon Hamilton.

²Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 19-21.

³Joseph Iremashvili, *Stalin und die Tragodie Georgiens* (Berlin: Volksblatt-Bruckerei, 1932) p. 18.

everything for his wife and country”⁴. In the story, as we will soon see, Koba has a girlfriend (Marina), but no wife. He does not fight for his country, but rather against the officers who locked his friend Iago in jail, and forced Iago’s love Nunu to marry against her will. To claim that the fight was only incidentally against the Cossack rulers would be unfair; however to claim that the entire book was “a sacrifice for his country” is equally misleading.

After searching unsuccessfully for a pair of summaries without inconsistencies, I turned to Kazbegi’s Russian translation of *The Patricide*, from which to do my own research.

Part One

At the start of the book, the story consists of two “holy” goals – true love, and the free will to acquire it. When a girl named Nunu is given to her aunt and uncle for a decent upbringing, the only rule her father gives is that she must be wed for love. An arranged marriage was entirely unacceptable.⁵ As soon as he slinks guiltily out the door, the aunt and uncle send Nunu into the field to work, and begin discussing to whom they will marry her, in order to get her off their hands. While in the field, she finds her beloved Iago, who is a poor serf. They plan their wedding, future, and – if necessary – escape from an arranged marriage.

We are, here, fully engrossed in a classic love story, on par with the greatest epics. In the same way, Kazbegi writes nothing that is done on uncertain terms. There are heroes, and there are villains. There is true love, and there is lust. There is white, and there is black. Either you are with us, or you are against us.

In Stalin’s government, and indeed the USSR as a whole, there were loyal Bolsheviks, and there were enemies and spies. There was nothing in between; any failure to comply with his philosophy on life must in fact be a traitor to the

⁴Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin* (New York:Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) p. 63.

⁵Alexander Kazbegi, *The Patricide*,(1882), p. 5.

cause. It could not be human error, uncertainty, or inability to comply. It was only treason, and the punishment for being an enemy of the state was severe. As Service mentions, Stalin usually believed his own misrepresentation of the world around him. “If ever he called somebody a traitor, it was not only the mind of others he was manipulating” ⁶. In all fairness, this was the Bolshevik party line since the days of Lenin. In a speech in 1920, he stated firmly that when “we speak of this struggle of the proletariat; each man must choose between joining our side or the other side.” ⁷ However, in the case of Joseph Stalin, it was not only others that he was channelling into a false dichotomy in his mind. He “refused to accept any blame for the economic chaos or the famine. The ‘last remnants of the moribund classes’, [...] were actively sabotaging the building of socialism”. ⁸ It is evident that Stalin viewed himself as the hero of the story, whether he remained deserving of that title or not.

We are next introduced to the two Cossack powers in the region of Khevi, Diambeg and Girgola. That they are Cossacks means that they have been sent in from the south of Russia to continue the occupation of Georgia. *The Patricide* takes place during the Caucasian War, which ended some thirty years before Stalin would read of it. During this time, Russia sought to expand south through the Caucasus, first through brutal military assault, and later through continual occupation of military forces. The Russians also introduced their own Governors, removing any election by the people of the region. Unsurprisingly, these intruders were disliked by all.⁹

Throughout the story, Cossacks are crude, self-important, and power hungry, doing whatever they need to get their way. However, Girgola and Diambeg are the military leaders, and they can truly cause havoc in the lives of the good and noble Georgians. As the two men discuss, while considering the high loss of life

⁶Service p.337.

⁷Vladimir Lenin, “Speech Delivered At An All-Russia Conference Of Political Education Workers Of Gubernia and Uyezd Education Departments”, November 3, 1920

⁸Ronald G. Suny, “Stalin and his Stalinism: Power and Authority in the Soviet Union, 1930-1953” in D. Hoffmann ed., *Stalinism* (Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p.21.

⁹Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus : an introduction* (New York : Oxford University Press, 2010)

in a poorly organized search mission, “Cossacks can replace other Cossacks, - there is no lack in the stations.”¹⁰

At the beginning, Diambeg was a captain of the Cossack guard. While in this position, he locked Glaha away in order to attempt to woo Nunu’s mother. When this was unsuccessful he rapes her, and Glaha swears vengeance on Diambeg. This is the first instance of a vow of vengeance in this story; the tangible result of a strong moral system, a Georgian who swears to get revenge will do so or die trying. Once Diambeg was moved up to the position of Governor, Glaha realized the futility of his vow. He hides away in shame, in cowardice, for failing to live up to his words.

Girgola is the current Cossack captain serving under Diambeg, and he is no better. It is very surprising to the aunt and uncle of Nunu when it is Girgola who shows up to ask for her hand in marriage, as he already has a wife (who he is known to beat regularly). Girgola claims unconvincingly that Nunu would be married to his brother, and the deal is made. The ransom is exchanged at once, to secure the deal.¹¹ While Nunu is despairing, her love Iago is accosted by Diambeg, Girgola, and other Cossacks. Girgola plants the idea into everyone’s head that Iago is a wanted caravan robber, and they lock him away. He does not confess to the crime, and Girgola shouts “I’ll make you confess! I’ll cripple you!” while beating him bloody.¹²

I find it quite reasonable that Joseph Dzhughashvili, frequently abused as a boy, would find Diambeg and Girgola’s technique of beating their prisoners as loathsome as any other reader would. I don’t, however, understand how a man who would take that position could go on to use many of the same methods on his own prisoners. As Miklos Kun brings to light with a very clear sketch of “the fate the one-time seminarist had in store for Bryukhanov,” Stalin had no qualms with creating his own mechanisms for torture.¹³ He did not simply demand

¹⁰Kazbegi, p.62.

¹¹“Traditional Russian Wedding” (http://masterrussian.com/russianculture/russian_wedding.htm) In a traditional wedding, the parents of the bride pretend to steal the bride, and demand a ransom of the groom.

¹²Kazbegi, p.20.

¹³Miklos Kun *Stalin: An Unknown Portrait* (Budapest: Central European University Press,

that answers be acquired, or men be punished; Stalin invented particular ways of tormenting his personal enemies.

Once Nunu has discovered that Iago had vanished, she refused to marry Girgola's brother and began threatening to kill herself. Weeks later, Nunu was been talking with her friend Marina in the forest, when Girgola and his men jumped out with the intent to kidnap her. Marina threw down her headscarf,¹⁴ and Girgola laughed in her face at the idea that he would have any reason to honor her mountain traditions.¹⁵ At long last Marina's love, Koba, leaps out to save the day. He wrestles himself between Marina and Girgola's men, but Girgola manages to ride off with Nunu. Koba calls out after him, that "before he grows a mustache on his upper lip" Girgola will pay for this.¹⁶

In this ending to Part 1, we see a very stark contrast between the unfeeling, crass Cossacks, who abuse anyone who gets in their way, to the traditional, honorable people of the Caucasus. The Georgians had very strong convictions about holding to your word, and maintaining a certain level of respectability. Women covered their heads with scarves in a reverent way; several times an expression regarding "not having removed one's headscarf" is used to express that a woman still has a conscience. If her head is still covered, she is still respectable, and can be trusted.¹⁷ Even the abreks, savage mountain men like Koba, had a code of chivalry and honor that could not be broken. An abrek was fearless in a fight, honored his vows, and isolated from his home, family, and friends; he was a professional robber of the mountains, concerned by nothing but his code of honor.¹⁸

2003) p.27: Illustration of a man suspended from a pulley, by something impaled in his anus, drawn by J. Stalin in 1931.

¹⁴"The Georgian Abkhaz Conflict" (http://www.circassianworld.com/Georgian-Abkhaz_Conflict.html) There is an ancient Georgian custom according to which a woman could oblige two fighting men to desist by throwing her white headscarf on the ground between them.

¹⁵p30 pat

¹⁶Kazbegi, p.31.

¹⁷Kazbegi p.52.

¹⁸Rebecca Gould "The Abrek in Chechen Folklore" *Journal of the International Caucasological Research Institute* 14/15 (2006): 37-46.

The Abrek

“Caution, secretiveness, taciturnity are the marks of the abrek or mountain chief, half brigand, half warrior, who is honored above all other men. The blood feud is still the law of the land. There are those who see in Stalin an abrek who has expanded his sway beyond his native mountains. That he did not do this extravagantly on horseback, but craftily by intrigue, is definitely in the tradition of the abrek.”¹⁹

The abrek was portrayed by Kazbegi as a Robin Hood character, stealing from the rich and giving to the needy – in this case the Chechen militants, who were holding their ground. Abreks historically went on to battle the Russian occupants in harsh guerrilla warfare during the Caucasian War, later attaining a sort of “aloof mythical savior” status. In some ways, the traditional abrek was more akin to Stalin than was his beloved Koba in particular. Koba simply happens upon, towards the end of the storyline, the Chechen rebels, whereas the mythical abrek character has been devoted to the cause from the start. While abreks were traditionally no more aligned with their friends than their foes, in the war they did choose a side: the side of the oppressed peasant class. Iremashvili claimed that “what impressed [him] and Soso were the works of Georgian literature which glorified the Georgian’s struggle for freedom.”²⁰ This, however visible, was a side-plot in the story. It is not even evident until Part 3. While the character of Koba clearly struck a chord with young Joseph, the context in which the novel existed probably had a lot more to do with his devotion to the abrek lifestyle than did the text of Kazbegi’s novel itself.

Stalin’s emotional detachment could very easily be likened to that of the abreks. A fellow prisoner describes Stalin as “completely imperturbable”, having never seen him “get agitated, lose control, get angry, shout, swear or – in short

¹⁹E. Lyons, *Stalin: Czar of all the Russians* (Philadelphia: JB Lippincott Company, 1940) p.56.

²⁰Montefiore, p.63.

– reveal himself in any other aspect than complete calmness.”²¹ Likewise Koba, who is described as “Marina’s beloved”, does not even notice when she faints during the skirmish in the woods. He does not dote on her, but instead runs off to save Iago and hunt Girgola. Does he ever see her again? We don’t know. Marina is only in the story to relay details of Iago’s arrest to Koba, and to bring Nunu into the woods. Other than that, she serves no purpose in the story, especially as far as Koba is concerned.

When Stalin annotated Lenin’s *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, he made a list of qualities which could be used to label a person good or bad. To be good “regardless of any other ‘vices’”, a person must be “strong (spiritually), active, and intelligent (capable). However, “weakness, laziness, and stupidity are the only things that can be called vices.”²² Each of these good traits falls exactly into the category of the abreks; Koba in particular is brave beyond reason, the fastest and most capable in a battle, and able to escape from the most dire of situations/discern matters not immediately obvious. Each of the bad can be used to describe the Cossacks.

By the end of Part 1, most of the major themes of the story are unveiled; the next two points will serve mainly to reinforce them.

Part 2

Koba gathers a gang of abreks together, and they break Iago out of prison, killing several guards in the process. This is abstracted away as “serving a greater purpose”, and none of them thinks twice about it. The group is pursued by other guards, and Iago – weakened by torture – falls down in a faint. Koba doesn’t even consider abandoning him for their own safety; to do so would be to betray a brother. When they manage to get away, Iago is weakened, and they must stop to rest.

Nunu is held hostage in a mountain fortress, by Girgola (and his brother, who

²¹Service, p.53.

²²Service, p.341.

does nothing but feel sorry for Nunu, and gets sent away). During a large storm, Girgola gives up on trying to convince her, and goes to rape her. Nunu runs to the other room, and tries to commit suicide. She is still resting, weakened from the attempt when Girgola hears that Iago has escaped. He runs off in search of Iago, leaving Nunu in the hands of his godmother.

The idea of brotherhood is expressed very strongly in *The Patricide*. Koba and Iago are known to be “blood brothers”, and we observe several other men join in their clan, including Torgva (one of Koba’s men), and Parch (a hunter, from whom Koba asks help). The tradition of joining as blood brothers is very particular; it involves exchanging bullets, hugging three times, and kissing three times. When a man has become your blood brother, you may never foresake him; he has become at least as important to you as your own brother. You are able to rest assured that your blood brother would die before betraying you, and Koba is wary of old friends who are not his blood brother, when Iago is in hiding.

Unlike Koba and the typical abrek, Stalin would never experience any camaraderie of note. The men that were closest to him were under more scrutiny than any others, and at greatest threat of execution. This is in part because any men close to him were likely to be contenders for his seat of power. Once it seemed as though his control was at risk, Stalin did anything necessary to ensure their fall from grace was sufficiently damning. The list scarcely needs mentioning, but includes Trotsky (murdered), Bukharin (executed), Zinoviev (executed), Kamenev (executed), Pyatakov (executed), Kirov (executed), and Rykov (executed), to list every man but Lenin listed in the first section (The Context) of McCauley’s book, *Stalin and Stalinism*.²³

Girgola immediately sets off to harass the villagers and shepherds into informing on Iago. He gains no information, and by breaking the guest/host customs of the region²⁴ only manages to lose the lives of several of his men, and

²³Martin McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism* (London: Pearson Longman, 2008) p.1-35.

²⁴In the mountains, there is a custom of wishing to have his case comes to the shepherds and asks for help. Shepherds to give him a few head of sheep from his flock. This is called a

gain the wrath of the countrymen. He can no longer manage to convince any of the men in the countryside to help him; only Cossacks will serve him loyally. He describes this to Diambeg, by saying that “our people [are] dog people”.²⁵

Nunu is being guarded by Girgola’s godmother, who at first believes that she is a dishonorable wife. “One who betrays her husband, in the mountains, is worthy of all cruel punishments imaginable”.²⁶ She soon feels “a woman’s sympathies” towards Nunu, and becomes so kind to her, that when she happens across Koba outdoors, she offers to bring him up to visit Nunu. Nunu sees the woman bringing up a shadowed man, and panics about Girgola’s return. She flees out the doorway, and runs across to safety...where she is rescued from a bear by Iago. Koba and the woman are left to assume that she has killed herself, and report as much to Girgola.

During this discussion between Koba and the woman, Darejan, Koba is struck by how ludicrous the situation has become. While police officials scour the countryside in search of a murderer in an attempt to dole out justice, a simple woman is begging protection from those very men...from that very murderer!

Once again we have an exemplification of the corrupt upper class oppressing the peasant class. Even this man, who one could label a cruel killer, is not at fault, because his acts were a direct result of his enemies’ actions. This is, in my opinion, the first of two passages that Stalin repeatedly referred to in his moral justification. This passage installs a framework, under which any action is permissible, as long as one is working for a good cause. The cause of ending social class distinction is the one that is featured both here in the novel, as well as throughout Stalin’s Russia. If Koba was not wrong to act as he did, how could Stalin be at fault either?

While Koba is out gathering other bands of mountain men to his cause, Iago and Nunu are attacked. All of them come back to defend the weak duo from Girgola’s men, but Iago is bleeding heavily at the end of the fight. Once again

flock ochhari knocking together. (Note by the author).

²⁵Kazbegi, p.61.

²⁶Kazbegi, p.63.

Nunu is carried off and imprisoned by Girgola. This time she is locked in his house, with no food and water for days. His manservant breaks her out and hides Nunu away with his wife.

Part 3

Koba and Iago are being protected by the hunters' village, but they are both desperate for news of Nunu. While hunting in the woods, Koba runs into Girgola's manservant, who recognizes him and brings him to visit Nunu. The men decide to smuggle Nunu to the town of Dzaug, where her father can hide her away until they bring Iago out to find her. However, Koba believes it to be impossible to fight through the ring of guards surrounding their current hiding place. The manservant explains that sometimes cunning is more effective than brute force, and they make plans to smuggle Nunu out under a cartful of hay.

During this conversation, an old acquaintance of Koba's (Vep'hiya) visits, bringing news of the Chechen militia. He joins Koba's brigand, and brings them in contact with the "rebel" forces gathering in the forest, who are currently organizing raids to collect funds and goods.

One notable scene while hunting involves two deer battling, knocking their antlers together. Koba is fascinated by the honor with which the deer wait the proper amount of time before striking again; that one could kill the other easily by striking early, yet this never happens, impresses upon him the nobility of the animal kingdom. This could be read as a metaphor for the nobility of the lower classes as well. It would not be a stretch to say that those who worked the earth are closer to nature, and that Kazbegi meant to directly remind the reader of the honor of the mountain folk in the Caucasus. It is the men who have simple lives who are most unfettered by the sins of the rich and powerful. It is certainly possible to read this as yet another strike against the upper class.

It is not until Vep'hiya arrives that Koba and Iago, or even the reader, are fully aware of the happenings in the rest of the Caucasus, surrounding the Khevi

region. Suddenly the small struggle between our characters, good and evil, is mapped onto the greater scale. The Cossacks have always been Russian, and the abreks have always been Georgian, but it is now clear that a larger, more important battle is at hand.

As Stalin was a Georgian, raised in the aftermath of the Caucasian War, he felt the full force of nationalism upon him in his childhood. He and his friends smuggled in Georgian nationalist books and poetry to the seminary (such as *The Patricide*), and Stalin even wrote his own nationalist poetry under a pseudonym.²⁷ He even led his own version of the raids mentioned in the novel, in order to collect for the rising Bolshevik party, on behalf of Georgia.²⁸ Although it was known that Stalin supported Marxism on a wide scale in the USSR, Lenin was concerned that he favored Georgia above other Soviet states for many years.²⁹ He did, in fact, continue to promote actions which would cause Georgia to fall under his axiomatic definition of a nation, described in *Marxism and the National Question*. That is, he encouraged the printing of Georgian literary classics, while his definition of nationhood requires a vigorous press and literature. In contrast to Ukraine and Belorussia, where he crushed new literature and culture, it is clear that Stalin was a Georgian nationalist even through the 1930s.³⁰

Nunu reconnects with her father, and remains hidden away. When Koba and Iago come to find her, only Koba is able to discern Glaha's identity. He returns with the good news, and the group makes plans to reconnect. There is a curfew each night, imposed by the Cossacks, so Koba's group is crawling under a bridge when they overhear their host telling some Cossack troops that he has found Koba and Iago. The news quickly gets back to Girgola. He is at first gleeful, that he has finally captured the rebels. The next moment, he hears news that Nunu is in town as well. Girgola had been informed that she was dead, so he was shocked. While it is one thing to give up on your tortured

²⁷Service, p.39.

²⁸Service, p.75.

²⁹Service, p.97.

³⁰Service, p.328.

love because she is in ruins at the bottom of a river, it is quite another to be ridiculed again as she is stolen away by Iago, to live happily ever after. Girgola is filled with “feral rage”.³¹

Girgola gathers his men to burn Iago and his group out of the building they are locked into. They are fired upon, and then the building is surrounded by hay and set aflame, killing everyone inside. Everyone, that is, except for Koba. As the town is watching the fire, a man arrives to report a murder of the old beggar, Glaha. The only suspect, Girgola declares, is Nunu. He holds a show trial, where she is banished to a life of hard labor in Siberia. She swears to God that she is innocent, and the townspeople are confused.

As Diambeg and Girgola ride back home the next day, Girgola is haunted by the pained face of Nunu. All of a sudden each is shot off of his horse. A shout rang out, as Koba approached on horseback, proudly proclaiming his presence. Diambeg died instantly, but Girgola had enough time to call for a priest. With his dying breath, he begs forgiveness for framing Nunu with Patricide.³²

The second passage, that is most likely to have been influential on young Joseph, is this last page. The direct comparisons of torture, killing the innocent with the enemies, and show trials are ironic, but I find it unlikely that he considered them worth mentioning. The line of import is that which is uttered by Koba, as he triumphantly brings down the enemy of the people. The line which proclaims his oath of vengeance a success: I am Koba! You are paying for the death of Iago!³³

³¹Kazbegi, p.79.

³²Kazbegi, p.83.

³³It's me, Koba! You are paying for the life of Iago!

Works Cited

Coene, Frederik. *The Caucasus: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2010. Print.

"THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONFLICT: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE." THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONFLICT: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Dec. 2012.

Hamilton, Jon. "Teenage Brains Are Malleable And Vulnerable, Researchers Say." NPR. NPR, n.d. Web. 11 Dec. 2012.

Hoffmann, David L. *Stalinism: The Essential Readings*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003. Print.

Iremaschwili, Joseph. *Stalin Und Die Tragödie Georgiens: Erinnerungen*. Berlin: Verfasser, 1932. Print.

Kun, Miklós. *Stalin: An Unknown Portrait*. Budapest: Central European UP, 2003. Print.

Lyons, Eugene. *Stalin: Czar of All the Russians*. London: G.G. Harrap &, 1940. Print.

McCauley, Martin. *Stalin and Stalinism*. Harlow, Essex, England: Longman, 1983. Print.

Montefiore, Simon. *Young Stalin*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Print.

Service, Robert W. *Stalin: A Biography*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2006. Print.

"Traditional Russian Wedding." Russian Culture. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Dec. 2012.