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Reading *Koba the Dread* (Review of Martin Amis' *Koba the Dread*)

By Stewart Home

For weeks, the English speaking public has been treated to the spectacle of a fraternal falling out between authors Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens, caused by Amis's book *Koba The Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*, a self-declared critique of communism. Tired of the circularity of the media 'row', for this week's Webexclusive we asked Stewart Home to dig a little deeper...

[IMAGE] Martin Amis is a man in trouble. He gets big advances for his books, but in the UK he is overshadowed by the popularity of younger writers such as Irvine Welsh. Amis is thus under pressure to maximise his media profile as a means of moving product. Hardly surprising then that Amis should frame his absurdly late denunciation of Stalin as a snub to his 'friend' Christopher Hitchens; public spats being peculiarly popular with UK newspapers. As a publicity stunt this manoeuvre worked well enough, generating widespread coverage in the press; but the book has been ridiculed by historians. The manufactured row with Hitchens serves both to illuminate and obscure the curious phenomenon of celebrities existing as a reification of what it is to be human. *Koba The Dread* tells us far more about Amis than it does about Stalin. *Koba* is not a revisionist history; it consists of fragments of cold war propaganda strung together by a gibbering idiot. Taking his cue from Robert Conquest - a former advisor to Margaret Thatcher - Amis equates each of his words with the dead of Stalinist terror: 'In these pages, guileless prepositions like at and to each represent the murder of six or seven large families.' Rather than adding gravity to a risible book, this cynical ploy illustrates that what an airhead like Amis writes is ultimately without weight. Amis speaks with a corpse in his mouth, and so inevitably the dead become ballast for his depleted prose. It is impossible to list all the things Amis gets wrong, although a scan through the more objective reviews will give an inkling of the book's inaccuracies.

The Amis and Hitchens spat is grist to the mill of the media precisely because the debate around it is so low grade. The matters on which Amis and Hitchens disagree are largely an irrelevance; far more important are the views they share and the ways in which these are used to manufacture consent through a mediatised pseudo-debate. Hitchens writes in his 'rejoinder' to *Koba* published in *The Atlantic Review* (September 2002): 'At several points he (Amis) states with near perfect simplicity that ideology is hostile to human nature, and implies that teleological socialism was uniquely or particularly so. I would no longer disagree with him about this. *Corruptio optimi pessima*: no greater cruelty will be devised than by those who are sure, or are assured, that they are doing good. However, one may come to such a conclusion by a complacent route or by what I would still dare to call a dialectical one. Does anybody believe that had the 1905 Russian Revolution succeeded, it would have led straight to the gulag, and to forced collectivization? Obviously not. Such a revolution might even have forestalled the Balkan wars and World War I. Yet that revolution's moving spirits were Lenin and Trotsky, defeated by the forces of autocracy, Orthodoxy, and militarism. Excuse me, but nobody can be bothered to argue much about whether fascism might have turned out better, given more propitious circumstances. And there were no dissidents in the Nazi Party, risking their lives on the proposition that the Führer had betrayed the true essence of National Socialism. As Amis half recognizes, in his en passant compliment to me, the question just doesn't come up.'

Hitchens, like Amis, has an extravagantly faulty understanding of this world because he invariably universalises his own preposterously limited perspectives. It may be the case that in the milieu in which Hitchens moves 'nobody can be bothered to argue much about whether fascism might have turned out better' under different circumstances, but this is certainly not true of those who band

together under the aegis of various neo-Nazi ideologies; even if what fascists believe might constitute 'better' is markedly different from the vague notion Hitchens seeks to convey with his crass deployment of this term. That said, the qualification 'much' and the self-righteous exclamation 'excuse me' which proceeds it, lead one to suspect the worst. In a way, Hitchens is echoing Amis, who writes in *Koba*: 'one should not forget that support for Hitler was broadbased and that Nazism had many distinguished admirers (among them Martin Heidegger and two Nobel Laureates in physics)' (page 218). Martin Heidegger did not, as Amis senselessly claims in a ridiculous attempt to downplay his namesake's involvement in fascism, admire Nazism. Heidegger joined the NSDAP so that he might lead it, even if his bid to place himself above 'the little corporal' as the philosophical and spiritual leader of the Nazi Party failed spectacularly. And contra Hitchens, the fact that there was dissent within the Nazi Party was well known to British intelligence; and it was this state of affairs that led the Political Warfare Executive to manufacture fake German stamps bearing Himmler's head instead of Hitler's, in the hope that this would start a rumour that Himmler was planning to supplant Hitler in a coup. However, those who were most open in their criticisms of Hitler – such as the Führer's favourite writer Ernst Jünger, who during the twenties contributed articles to the Nazi Party press and had been close to Goebbels - tended to gather together under the banner of National Bolshevism as their disillusionment with Hitler set in. The National Bolsheviks castigated Hitler for being insufficiently aristocratic, and Jünger seems to have involved himself in a 1944 assassination attempt on the Führer.

Koba The Dread is a glib tome, as can be illustrated by the following quote from a concluding section that is directly addressed to Christopher Hitchens: 'You should read the twenty-four volumes of Lenin's works in the following way: every time you see the words 'counterrevolution' or 'counterrevolutionary' you should take out the 'counter'; and every time you see the words 'revolution' or 'revolutionary' you should put the counter back in again.' Had Amis been sincere in giving such advice, he might have taken it up himself, and thus alighted on the curious figure of Amadeo Bordiga, one of those denounced in Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*. Amis, like Hitchens, has never encountered the communist left in all its originality nor understood the nature of its break with the Third International. Although the Bordigist bloc backed Trotsky in the period of faction fighting immediately prior to Stalin's ascendancy, it simultaneously distanced itself from the industrialisation strategy of the 'left opposition' with which Hitchens still - to some extent - identifies. Bordiga was in broad agreement with Bukharin's analysis that the implementation of Trotsky's programme, which was taken up by Stalin, could only be realised by the most elephantine state bureaucracy of all time. However, for Bordiga, capitalism was first and foremost an agrarian revolution, the commodification of farming; and although Amis doesn't know it, this is the basis of the 'terror-famine' he describes in his book. Bordiga insisted that if a working class party was not in control of the Russian state, then all that was left of the October revolution was petty producer capitalism. Indeed, at a 1926 Moscow Comintern meeting Bordiga suggested that the proletarian nature of the Russian revolution could be demonstrated by allowing all the international communist parties to govern the country collectively, and when this proposal was received coolly, Bordiga insulted Stalin to his face by telling him he was the gravedigger of the revolution. And so, Amis merely provides evidence of his own ignorance when he writes: 'Anyway, there seems to be a rule, and it may be metaphysical: when Stalin wished for death, then that wish came true.' Bordiga, of course, happily outlived Stalin by two decades.

To Bordiga, as to any objective observer, the growth of productive forces simply proves the bourgeois character of the Soviet phenomenon; the Trotskyists with whom Hitchens identifies have always claimed it as 'proof' of the exact opposite. Contra Amis and Hitchens, Marxist-Leninism extended the bourgeois revolution, that is to say the expropriation of the Prussian Junker class by the Red Army, through its agrarian policies and by its development of the productive forces. Amis gets it wrong when he treats the capitalist USSR as if it was a communist state; and Hitchens gets it wrong when he treats

Trotsky's bourgeois programme as if it was communist blueprint. The minor ideological differences between Amis and Hitchens are inconsequential: both view the world through the distorted prism of cold war propaganda; both have always been every bit as pro-capitalist in practice as their *bête noir* Stalin; and both make pat and doctrinaire 'denunciations' of ideology that are blatantly ideological in character. Replacing Lenin's name with that of Hitchens or Amis in the following quote from *Koba The Dread* does little damage to its meaning: 'Ideology brings about a disastrous fusion, that of violence and righteousness - savagery without stain. Hitler's ideology was foul, Lenin's fair-seeming.' (page 86). By assuming their historically determined outlooks as white male subjects are of universal validity, Hitchens and Amis feel they can project themselves as untainted by ideology, but in doing this they've merely produced a bad infinity. It should go without saying that while such ideological contortions are never universal, they are as 'fair-seeming' as one can be in a one-sided application of this concept; the word 'fair' is also a synonym for 'blonde' or 'white'.

Amis resorts to racial stereotypes on a number of occasions in *Koba The Dread*, for example: 'The German combination of advanced development, high culture and bottomless barbarity is of course very striking.' (page 92). Even when 'denouncing' racism, Amis unconsciously reproduces it, albeit in partially inverted forms: 'Anti-Semitism is an announcement of inferiority and a protest against a level playing field - a protest against talent... It is also a religion - the religion of the inadequate. When tracing the fateful synergy between Russia and Germany (soon to climax), we may recall that The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the 'warrant for genocide' as it is called in Norman Cohn's book of that name, was a fiction composed by the Tsarist secret police.' (pages 218-9). In saying that anti-Semitism is a protest against talent, Amis doesn't quite succeed in his apparent aim of turning the standard slanders of anti-Semites upside down; it shouldn't need stating that bigotry is more effectively tackled through the refutation of all notions of racial hierarchy. The desire Amis expresses to ground inequality on a level playing field implies playing a particular game; and are not level playing fields (in the form of village greens and warm beer), the very things that self-conscious racists invoke when they rant that we should 'play the white man's game'? Amis' resort to racial stereotypes appears to be unconscious but also inevitable given his immersion in European literature and his clumsy attempts to use it as a tool to interpret the world; character in bourgeois literature is always and already also national character. This sometimes leads Amis to appear confused as to whether he is anti-Nazi and anti-Bolshevik, or simply anti-German and anti-Russian. Likewise, it is worth noting that anyone who has actually read either Henri Rollin's *L'Apocalypse de Notre Temps* or Norman Cohn's *Warrant For Genocide*, ought to know that the Tsarist secret police plagiarised The Protocols rather than 'composed' them. It is impossible to tell if Amis is ignorant of this fact, or whether he is simply so inept at using the English language that he put down the word 'composed' because he didn't realise that a term such as 'fabricated' is required to maintain factual accuracy.

While *Koba The Dread* has received some extremely hostile reviews, I've not seen any that question the absurd beliefs Amis holds about his talents as a writer, and this is strange given the slack way in which he uses words. Hitchens, like many others, is full of praise for Amis as both a stylist and a fiction writer. That Amis is ambitious cannot be doubted, but because he fails to accomplish what he sets out to achieve, he is also very literally pretentious. Amis has no ear for rhythm, and his prose hobbles along because he overloads it with unnecessary qualifications; and this is a flaw that can be found in his fiction, as well as in his miserable attempts to write history. For example: 'The possibility has been suggested that in the period 1917-24 more people were murdered by the secret police than were killed in all the battles of the Civil War' (page 34). Beginning the sentence by identifying the individual who made this suggestion and dropping the double qualification of 'possibility' and 'suggested', would greatly improve it; viz, 'Martin Amis has suggested... etc.'. Amendments of this type would have a double advantage for the reader, in that we wouldn't be subjected to the baggy prose which is the hallmark of the Amis 'style', and we'd also be alerted to the fact that the veracity of what is being said cannot be relied upon.

The problem with *Koba The Dread* is not simply that Amis has no grasp of historical method, it is also that he doesn't know how to write. This, of course, raises a raft of issues that the media spat between Amis and Hitchens serves to obscure; such as the fact that only bourgeois idealists would attempt to pass off vanguard leaders like Trotsky as 'moving spirits' of communist revolution. Stalinism has nothing to do with communism, and everything to do with capitalism. Communism is material human community. Rather than delivering us the best of everything, market economies more often than not provides us with the worst; books that are worth reading are few and far between, whereas the fetid spew of right-wing mystical cretins is thrown at us by the bucket load. One bad writer can be replaced easily enough with another, especially in a field such as literature, which these days is pretty much a cultural irrelevance. Amis, of course, is not simply jockeying for a bigger share of the market place against the best-selling success of Irvine Welsh, he is also battling against factually accurate historical works that are more fantastic than anything his enfeebled imagination could invent. Hence his turn to history, or rather his failed attempt to write history; an attempt at posterity, an attempt to write himself into history. The Amis and Hitchens media spat is in part a bid for immortality, and while there is no danger of Amis being remembered for a talent he does not possess, he may yet succeed in living on after his death albeit as a figure of fun.

Koba The Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million by Martin Amis (Jonathan Cape, London, £16.99)