

## Intelligence in Public Media

### **Young Heroes of the Soviet Union: A Memoir and a Reckoning**

Alex Halberstadt (Random House, 2020—Kindle edition), 289 pages in print, illustrations.

**Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson**

Alex Halberstadt's *Young Heroes of the Soviet Union* is the latest example of a type of book—one combining family history, personal memoir, and meditation on how the Soviet experience continues to shape Russia today—that has become common since the turn of the century as journalists and emigrés seek to explain Russian political culture and the rise of President Putin's dictatorship.<sup>a</sup> In this vein, Halberstadt, a journalist who emigrated with his mother and grandparents to the United States as a young boy, writes of the experiences of his half-Russian, half-Lithuanian Jewish family in the late Tsarist, interwar, and World War II periods, as well as of his childhood in Brezhnev-era Moscow and adjustment to life in New York. Halberstadt's account is interesting and at times affecting, though in most ways not much different from many others.

What makes *Young Heroes* worthwhile for readers of *Studies*, however, is the first part of the book, that describes Halberstadt's return to Russia as an adult, when he tracks down his paternal grandfather, Vassily, an old man living in a small apartment in Vinnytsia, Ukraine. Vassily, it turns out, is a retired intelligence officer, but not just any old KGB hack—he was one of Stalin's bodyguards from 1941 until the dictator's death in 1953. Halberstadt gradually gets the old man to give up enough details about his past to reconstruct his career. Following a stint in the Red Cavalry, Vassily came to Moscow in the early 1930s to attend the OGPU Academy.<sup>b</sup> From there, he was assigned to the Lubyanka during the height of the Terror to do the “daily work of the purges,” as Halberstadt puts it.

Vassily survived by keeping his head down, though somehow he managed to be noticed by Lavrentiy Beria,

the last and longest-lived of Stalin's secret police chiefs. It was Beria, who in late 1941 brought Vassily back from the front—he had been near Smolensk, serving in one of the NKVD detachments that shot Red Army soldiers accused of cowardice or desertion—to become a bodyguard. The price was that in addition to guarding Stalin, Vassily became one of Beria's loyal henchmen, sent in 1944 to Crimea to help deport the Tartars. He served Beria reliably until Stalin's death and then, perhaps seeing the handwriting on the wall, requested in April 1953 a transfer to Vinnytsia so he could look after his aging parents. Beria was himself executed soon after, and Vassily spent the rest of his career in Vinnytsia, keeping an eye on Ukrainian nationalists.

Halberstadt does a neat job of unpacking the contradictory ways in which Vassily, decades later, sees himself and his work. Sometimes he is proud. “I was a major,” he tells his grandson, “I had an office in Lubyanka and supervised fifty-five men.” Sometimes he is self-justifying. “Of course, we believed” in the communist cause, he says when he talks of the purges. Sometimes he is evasive. “Beyond ‘interrogation’ and ‘paperwork,’ he refused to elaborate” on his duties, writes Halberstadt. Other times, he is resentful. Beria “used me like a common thug. Beria was the smartest of [the leadership], and I loathed him.” Finally, he is a sad and exhausted old man who had been “frightened every single day” for almost two decades and is grateful just to have survived.

For anyone interested in the question of how Stalin's secret policemen did their work, and what the work did to them, *Young Heroes of the Soviet Union* is well worth a read.



The reviewer: J. E. Leonardson is an analyst in the CIA's Directorate of Analysis.

a. See, for example, Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (2017); Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (2012); and Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (2012), all reviewed in earlier issues of this journal.

b. Acronym from Russian *Obedinënnoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie* “United State Political Directorate,” an organization for dealing with counterrevolutionary activities in the Soviet Union, existing from 1922 (1922–23 as the GPU) to 1934 and replacing the Cheka. It was absorbed into the NKVD in 1934.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.