

The Death of Stalin

Main Journey and Quad Productions, released 9 March 2018. Screenplay by Armando Iannucci, David Schneider, Ian Martin, and Peter Fellows; directed by Armando Iannucci; starring Simon Russell Beale, Steve Buscemi, Adrian McLoughlin, Jeffrey Tambor, and Michael Palin. Running time one hour, 47 minutes.

Reviewed by John Kavanagh

On 6 March 1953, *Pravda* informed the world that Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin had died at 9:50 p.m., 5 March. “The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the USSR Council of Ministers, and the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet announce with profound sorrow. . . . The heart of Lenin’s comrade-in-arms and the inspired continuer of Lenin’s cause, the wise leader and teacher of the Communist Party and the Soviet people, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, has stopped beating.”

The sudden departure of the Iron Man, in charge of the country’s Communist Party since the early 1920s, in unchallenged control of Russia’s affairs since the mid-1930s, and who in the post World War II era exercised complete and ruthless domination of the expansive Soviet Union, left the world puzzled and worried. Who was in charge? Director, screenwriter Armando Iannucci, known to American audiences as the creative force behind the award winning HBO political comedy *VEEP*, offers the answer in his caustic, irreverent, and frequently hilarious film, *The Death of Stalin*.

The film begins with Stalin (portrayed by Adrian McLoughlin) enjoying his last meal in the company of his fawning henchmen, Nikita Khrushchev (Steve Buscemi), Georgy Malenkov (Jeffrey Tambor), Vyacheslav Molotov (Micheal Palin), and Lavrenti Beria (Simon Russell Beale). The gathering of Stalin’s inner circle of party leaders follows the ritual pattern his guests are familiar with, if not entirely comfortable: excessive drinking, crude schoolboy humor, the reflexive overreaction to their host’s ill-timed quips, and the piling on of abuse on whichever participant Stalin chooses to humiliate—usually the hapless Malenkov. They know how the night will end, with Stalin once again forcing them to join him watching, and enjoying, a screening of a John Wayne western, part and parcel of the price each pays to maintain his tenuous balance at the apex of the Soviet hierarchy. And it is just that delicate balance which dominates the conversation as the guests momentarily pair off out of

earshot of Stalin. The main subject, as always, is the List—that is, the list of names Stalin has passed to NKVD Director Beria. The names on the list represent people out of Stalin’s favor, for whatever reason, people who will be arrested, imprisoned, exiled, executed, the people who will simply disappear. The list is a subject of constant tension and fevered speculation. On this night a rumor holds that Malenkov, second to Stalin in the party leadership, might soon be added to the list.

Stalin’s subsequent lethal brain hemorrhage, in Iannucci’s slapstick retelling, has the shocked leadership cadre in a panicked rush to memorialize the dictator with a huge, deifying public funeral, showcasing their own fealty to the fallen hero. Fearing the Russian people’s reaction to Stalin’s death will lead to chaos, their shared concern for the stability of the Soviet state pales in comparison to each man’s fixation on his own survival and status in a suddenly unsettled political reality. In their last action as a cohesive group, they strike out at assumed or suspected enemies. With the approval of the others, Beria assembles a new enemies’ list and launches a sweeping reign of terror. Then it’s every man for himself. The resulting series of desperate alliances, conspiracies, compromises, backstabblings, and double-crosses provides the comic underpinning of Iannucci’s dark unmasking of the pervasive, amoral ethos which was Stalin’s true legacy.

Mistrust, betrayal, and the facile use of violence by state organs to maintain order and control based on abject fear are the ruling principles. There are no limits to the use of the state’s power to ensure the self-preservation of those who wield that power. Iannucci spares no irony in showing that even familial bonds can dissolve in the service of such institutional ruthlessness. As the struggle for dominance evolves into a personal rivalry between Khrushchev and Beria, Beria courts Molotov’s support by arranging for Molotov’s unfairly imprisoned wife to be freed. Later, when Molotov is threatened by rumors that his allegiance to Marxist theory is suspect and he might be imperiled, he suggests to his colleagues that a useful

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solution would be to have his wife rearrested. The scene is played for laughs but fits neatly into the survival-at-any-cost arena the characters inhabit. Iannucci convinces us that such a brutal calculation is plausible within the warped moral universe Joseph Stalin bequeathed to his followers. It is not enough to say that this is satire. The film's summary moral condemnation of the Soviet system is both uncompromising and complete.

Dystopian regimes have previously been lampooned successfully in black comedies. Ernst Lubitch's *To Be Or Not To Be* (1942) savaged a Gestapo-run regime in occupied Poland. Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) sent up a Hitler-like despot as a pathetic buffoon. Iannucci's film deserves its place in this body of work, which with no small measure of humor delivers serious points regarding the markedly unfunny reality of unbridled tyranny.



The Reviewer: John Kavanagh is a retired CIA operations officer and frequent reviewer.