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With Stalin: Memoirs (Book Review)

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Book Review

by John M. Zinkand

With Stalin: Memoirs by Enver Hoxha. Tirana, Albania: "8 Nentori" Publishing House, 1979. 224 pages, \$3.00. Reviewed by McKendree R. Langley, Associate Professor, Abraham Kuyper Chair, Lectureship Center.

During the 1940's and 1950's a number of famous statesmen including Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Charles de Gaulle had discussions with the late Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin. The most famous book to arise out of such talks was *Conversations with Stalin* (1962) by the former high Yugoslav official Milovan Djilas. The talks that Djilas had with Stalin led to Djilas' disillusionment with Communism and his final imprisonment by President Tito in 1957. Quite different is this book of impressions of Stalin by the aging Albanian party leader, Enver Hoxha, age 72. Published during the Stalin centennial celebrated in Albania in 1979, *With Stalin* reveals Hoxha's youthful admiration for the Soviet leader that matured into the steel-like rigid admiration of old age.

The Balkan Communist leaders Hoxha and Tito without the help of the Soviet Red Army won power in their respective countries by guerilla warfare in World War II. Hoxha controlled all of Albania by November, 1944. He has remained in power as the First Secretary of the Party of Labor in Albania. He has always been a firm Stalinist and today is the senior Communist leader in Eastern Europe and the world.

Hoxha had five major meetings with Stalin in the Soviet Union between July, 1947 and April, 1951

to report, to request aid, or to have disputes settled. The Stalin of these memoirs is a modest, wise and authoritative leader. Stalin is the kind father who put the young Enver Hoxha at ease with jokes and with interest in Albanian affairs. Never dictatorial in discussion, Stalin only made suggestions. "This is my opinion," he was quoted as declaring many times. The book gives a glimpse of the Soviet leader at dinners enjoying the food, drink, conversation, and after-dinner movies. These small dinners were always held late at night either in the Kremlin or at the leader's villa. Stalin seemed to be most relaxed in such informal gatherings. Glass in hand, Hoxha talked of the purges and forced collectivization of the land in Albania, with Stalin sipping wine and nodding in agreement. The young Albanian leader received the support that he coveted for his policies. Stalin suggested that the Communist party in the small Balkan country be legalized as the Party of Labor and urged the establishment of the University of Tirana. Hoxha obeyed. Stalin said that Albania should plant certain seeds to boost agriculture in that agrarian land. The seeds appeared. When Stalin expressed an interest in Albanian culture, Hoxha became ecstatic. Expressions of hatred for the United States and Britain and the rejection of Marshall Plan aid made Stalin happy.

During the period 1948-1949 when Tito broke away from the Moscow orbit, Hoxha had much to tell Stalin about Albania's problems with Yugoslavia. Aside from the Yugoslav ideological deviations, the Albanian leader was most concerned about the future of Kosovo, an ethnic Albanian area within Yugoslavia next to the Albanian border. Hoxha wanted this territory returned to the control of the Tirana government, but Tito refused, fearing that it would weaken the ethnic mosaic under the control of Belgrade. Hoxha charged Tito with committing outrages in Kosovo and even trying to take over Albania itself. Albania then broke its formerly close ties with Yugoslavia and sided with Stalin in denouncing Tito's independent course. As Hoxha related all these details, Stalin expressed his strong agreement.

Another important topic in these conversations was the Albanian controversy with the leaders of the Greek Communist Party. In Hoxha's view the Greeks lacked aggressiveness in both their ideology and military tactics. They had let themselves be defeated in their wartime attempts to bring Athens into the Red orbit. The Greek Communists had gone so far as to advocate along with democratic groups that a region of southern Albania with a Greek population known as Epirus be returned to Greece. Stalin summoned both the Greek party leaders and Hoxha and another Albanian leader, Mehmet Shehu, to the Kremlin for talks. Both the Albanian and Greek sides of the controversy were presented to Stalin, who then flatly sided with Hoxha. The Greeks admitted their mistakes and embraced Hoxha. Case closed.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of the book is that which describes the discussions of organized religion. Hoxha related how he bowed in symbolical fashion before Stalin, the memory of Lenin, and the Communist party (p. 41). The Soviet leader asked his young guest to say something about the religions practiced in Albania. Hoxha answered that the people embraced Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Islam. In addition, he indicated that the population of Kosovo was predominantly Islamic, as was Albania itself. Stalin then asked Hoxha if he ate pork, sensing that the Albanian leader came from an Islamic background. Hoxha replied that he did eat pork. Stalin added that this was an ancient Muslim practice which must be handled with care even though it was an out-dated custom. Abrupt changes in the popular customs

would disrupt the national unity (pp. 121-122). At another time the conversation turned to the question of Catholicism in Albania. Both leaders agreed that the Vatican was a center of international reaction and spying. Many priests had sided with the Nazis and the Fascist occupying powers. They were purged after the war. Stalin then related a conversation that he had had with Churchill and Roosevelt at Yalta in the final stages of the war. Churchill and Roosevelt wanted the Pope to be included in the Allied coalition against the Axis powers. Stalin smiled and asked how many armies the Pope had, adding that more is required to fight than talk and incense (p. 155).

The last time Hoxha saw Stalin was at the Nineteenth Soviet Party Congress in October, 1952. In his speech Stalin called on the delegates to carry forward the red banner of Communism. In his heart Hoxha made a religious vow to carry on pure Stalinism in Albania as an act of devotion to the Soviet party leader he admired. Today Hoxha is witnessing to the world his steadfast devotion to Stalin's principles by short-wave Radio Tirana. This effort is part of an ambitious propaganda campaign in which Hoxha also attempts to lead radical Communist movements in the Third World.

It is significant that this book begins and ends with symbols of religious devotion to Stalin. Both Hoxha and Stalin emerge in these pages as men of the Muslim East from Albania and Georgia (near Turkey and Iran), in Communist garb. They are purists in the religion of unbelief that they confess. Stalin is clearly presented as the Great Bolshevik Ayatollah. Enver Hoxha likewise presents himself as the late Soviet dictator's successor as the new Marxist-Leninist Ayatollah. Much of what is reported in the book about Stalin is formally true but colored by a satanic value system.

In sum, *With Stalin* is a very religious book about men who clothed themselves with infallibility for all of life—personal and public—like an Ayatollah. The only difference, as this Albanian memoir demonstrates, is that these men were gripped with the religion of secular Marxist unbelief and the Communist party idolatry rather than with traditional Islam. The only perspective that can truly confront these false gods of the modern world with the full power of the Lord of Lords is a political spirituality rooted in the sovereignty of God.