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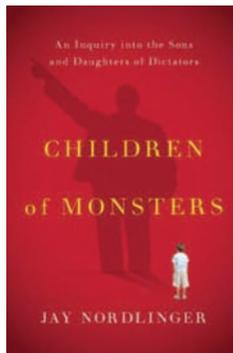
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Books, Arts & Manners

Living by Lies

DANIEL J. MAHONEY



Children of Monsters: An Inquiry into the Sons and Daughters of Dictators, by Jay Nordlinger (Encounter, 336 pp., \$25.99)

DESPOTISM is as old as the political condition of man and is the antithesis of free and decent human life. In the 20th century it took an impressive variety of forms. There were those who killed, immiserated, and imprisoned in the name of building truly “revolutionary” societies. These were the ideological tyrants—Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, Mao—who killed in the name of perverted ideas—Communism, Fascism, National Socialism, revolution, progress. There were the old-fashioned despots—Bokassa, Amin, Duvalier, Mobutu—who read like a page ripped out of the historians of antiquity: They needed no ideology to justify their depredations. Some, such as the Kims in North Korea, combine sincerely held ideological fanaticism with the pure capriciousness of the non-ideological tyrant. All despots show contempt for the moral law and elementary human decency.

Mr. Mahoney, the author of The Other Solzhenitsyn: Telling the Truth about a Misunderstood Writer and Thinker, holds the Augustine Chair in Distinguished Scholarship at Assumption College.

NR senior editor Jay Nordlinger has written a gem of a book that is at once an authoritative guide to 20th-century despotism and, even more compellingly, an astute moral and psychological study of the children of 20 of the worst dictators of the 20th century. (Not all were outright monsters: Nordlinger convincingly argues that the Spanish strongman Francisco Franco—a moderate authoritarian for much of his rule—was a “relative lamb” compared with the others.) The book had its distant origin in a trip to Albania. While there, Nordlinger inquired whether the cruel and fanatical Albanian tyrant Enver Hoxha had had children, and, if so, what they and their lives were like. As it turned out, all were unapologetic defenders of their tyrant father.

This motif would come to run deeply through Nordlinger’s book. Almost all the sons and daughters, and grandchildren, of the tyrants of the 20th century remained unequivocally loyal to the tyrant-father or tyrant-grandfather. This is true even of the relatively normal ones who themselves did not become monsters. Family loyalty, a natural and generally admirable human phenomenon, in the case of these souls fatally undermined the ability to see clearly and from a perspective that does justice to truth and conscience. Even Edda Mussolini Ciano, whose famous diplomat husband, Count Ciano, was murdered by her father, eventually reconciled with her father’s name and legacy. Saddam Hussein’s daughters saw their husbands brutally murdered after returning from exile in Jordan in 1995; they remain to this day among his most impassioned, militant partisans. The grandson of Mao basks in the reflected glory of one of the great mass murderers—and ideological tyrants—of the 20th century. The vast majority of the “children of monsters” have chosen to “live by lies,” to diminish their humanity by defending and perpetuating evil and mendacity. Some children—Vasily Stalin, Nicu Ceausescu, Uday Hussein—became despicable brutes. These monster sons had muti-

lated souls and specialized in brutalizing, killing, and raping with impunity. Some—Jean-Claude Duvalier, Kim Jong-il, Bashar Assad, and Kim Jong-un—became successor despots, with uneven applications of cruelty and fanaticism.

Bashar Assad wanted to opt out of politics and practice the ophthalmology for which he was trained in London. But the early death of a brother—the chosen heir—brought him unexpectedly to the forefront. With the coming of the Arab Spring and the resultant Syrian civil war, this reluctant tyrant has become a national butcher, killing far more people than his tyrannical father Hafez Assad ever did. He has continued the family business with impressive ruthlessness.

Colonel Moammar Qaddafi’s son Saif al-Islam Qaddafi knew that despotism was “dark and wrong” and tried to take on the airs of a Western liberal and modernizer. (The words quoted, like all subsequent quotes unless otherwise attributed, are from Nordlinger.) Saif al-Islam “tried to go straight,” but when his father’s dictatorship came under assault in 2011, he, too, murdered and persecuted opponents of that dictatorship with abandon. He made the choice to defend the family business. He “grew a beard in the style of fundamentalist Muslims . . . and gave wild-eyed rants on television.” He now rots in a Libyan prison, his liberalism (and Western connections) a thing of distant memory.

Some monster sons stand out in a very competitive pack. Uday Hussein was a psychopath of the first order and clearly earned his self-designation as “Abu Sarhan,” the Wolf. He had no empathy, no concern for other human beings. Vasily Stalin was a drunkard and a satyr and revealed the “moral sterility of Stalinism” (as the Russian historian Dmitri Volkogonov once phrased it). Nicu Ceausescu was appalling in every way, drunk and crazy.

As we have mentioned, there are those who defend the indefensible without being monsters themselves. This is true of several of the Mussolinis, the Tojo children as a group (who appear

eminently decent), Valentin Ceausescu, Nzanga Mobutu, and Pol Pot's daughter from late in life, Sar Patchata (who seems to have no awareness that her father was one of the great killers of modern times). The rest either defend "necessary murder," in Auden's memorable words, or claim that their fathers were merely defending the laws that were in place at the time (the risible claim of the wholly unapologetic Hoxha family).

Two children of tyrants stand out for a moral seriousness that led them to "live not by lies," in the celebrated phrase of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. This phrase, this imperative, serves as the moral center and thematic core of Nordlinger's book. He could not have chosen a better one. The lie is at heart

Svetlana "did her best" given "the circumstances of her almost unimaginable life." She had a conscience and refused to follow that path of the lie. As confused and troubled as she sometimes was, for the most part "she followed the Solzhenitsyn maxim of 'live not by lies.'" In her "lay a greatness," a greatness obscured by those who adopt a reductively "therapeutic" approach to her life.

Fidel Castro's daughter Alina Fernández defected to the United States in 1993, joining his sister, who had fled the island prison in 1964. Alina could not close her eyes to the reality of life in a Communist despotism. She did not like the "surveillance that was sometimes inflicted on her" and did not want her daughter to grow up

with courage and humanity, and has done genuinely good work for peace and reconciliation in Uganda. One of the Ayatollah Khomeini's grandchildren, a liberal religious cleric named Hussein, publicly compared his grandfather's rule unfavorably with the shah's and the depredations of the Mongols, boldly rejecting what he did not hesitate to call a new "religious totalitarianism." He even called on the United States to help liberate Iran as it liberated Iraq in 2003–04.

Children of Monsters is fascinating on many levels. One learns a great deal about the human costs of despotism, the lives lost and souls damaged beyond repair. The book is filled with marvelous tidbits: We learn that the maternal uncle of Saddam Hussein

Some of the children and grandchildren came short of living in the truth but at the same time **refused to simply succumb to the lie.**

a denial of an order of truth that makes humanizing demands on our hearts and souls. The lie covers over the clear evidence of conscience and makes us complicit with evil. Violence and lies are the twin pillars of ideological despotism, and mendacity is inherent in despotism of any sort. In one of her autobiographical works from the 1960s, Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, explained that her turn to Christianity represented the rejection of "evil, the lie." She knew that systematic mendacity is never far from radical evil. Defecting to the West in 1967, she failed to find sustained happiness in the free world. Svetlana led a troubled life, one that had no small amount of paranoia, confusion, and moral failure. She even redefected to the Soviet Union in 1984, only to regret her decision almost immediately; after 18 months, she was allowed to return to the United States. But she saw the full truth about her father and totalitarianism and had the courage to write about it in two books that "ought to endure." Nordlinger is right that those books, *Twenty Letters to a Friend* and *Only One Year*, "are true, brave, and beautiful." He is also surely right that

in a police state. In 1997, she published a "fascinating and highly valuable book" that exposed Castroite despotism for what it was. She, too, chose to live not by lies, and raised her voice fearlessly.

The children Nordlinger admires most are the defectors, who had "uprisings of conscience and saw reality for what it was." This was far more difficult for Svetlana than for Alina, who never lived with her father and was less close to the source of the evil. This book shows in myriad ways that family loyalty has its limits, that our ultimate loyalty must be to truth and decency, even if most of us, most of the time, can conjugate the requirements of conscience and family life with relative ease and grace.

Some of the children and grandchildren came short of living in the truth but at the same time refused to simply succumb to the lie. Idi Amin's son Jaffar has been, at times, "a rank apologist for his father: a white-washer, a denier." He claims, in a book on his father, that the Ugandan dictator killed only 10,800 people and not the 300,000 of which he is plausibly accused. But Jaffar has also reached out to some of his father's victims

who raised him and later became mayor of Baghdad was an admirer of Hitler and penned a little book in 1940 called "Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews, and Flies." The apple did not fall far from the tree. For his part, Saddam profoundly admired Stalin, while Ceausescu admired Mao and Kim Il-sung (even having the latter's book on *juche*, the ideology of North Korean Communism, translated into Romanian). And the cruel and cannibalistic Emperor Bokassa of the Central African Empire had 50 children from 17 or 18 wives. One of the sons was named Charlemagne and died penniless in the streets of Paris at the age of 31.

Jay Nordlinger has written a book that expertly delves into human evil while richly illuminating the resources of the human spirit. *Children of Monsters* is a profound contribution to the study of 20th-century despotism, and to the moral psychology of family life under the worst regimes. It is a singular contribution to the literature of anti-totalitarianism. In it, high journalism meets moral and political reflection of a serious and very accessible sort.

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