

# Philippa Hetherington review of:

## Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Mischka's War: A European Odyssey of the 1940s*

(Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2017), 313 pp., PB \$34.99, ISBN 9780522867855

Sheila Fitzpatrick is a world-renowned historian of the Soviet Union now based at the University of Sydney, known best for her revisionist work on Stalinism that uses social history to understand how life was experienced in the aggregate in the context of terror. In one of her most influential books, *Everyday Stalinism*, Fitzpatrick offers us *Homo Sovieticus*, the Soviet everyman, as a heuristic through which to understand how the average person experienced the everyday in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> In *Mischka's War*, Fitzpatrick turns her regular mode on its head. Here, she takes an individual life and traces its singularity, complexity and inability to be reduced to the 'average'. Not insignificantly, the individual life she chooses is that of her late husband, the theoretical physicist Michael Danos. She emphasises that the book is 'a historian's book, not a memoir, but it's also a wife's book about her husband' (p. xvi). Writing it is an act of love, as well as an attempt to understand better the man taken from her too soon, and finally a reflection on what one person's story can tell us about war and its aftermath.

Fitzpatrick's chance meeting with Danos on a plane in 1989, with which she opens the book, was one of life's happy coincidences. Here was a historian of the Soviet Union falling in love with a Latvian who had lived part of his life under Soviet occupation and retained family ties to Riga, a city that had flourished under the Russian empire, suffered under Nazi and Soviet wartime incursions, and would emerge from its Cold War shadow to independence two years later. But, as any good historian of Eastern Europe knows, questions of ethnicity and nationality in the region were more complicated than the designation 'Latvian' would suggest. While he was born to a Latvian mother and Hungarian father in Riga in 1922, Danos was reluctant to define himself as 'Latvian'. He grew up speaking German (the shared language of his parents and of the traditional Baltic German elite), Latvian (his mother's tongue) and Russian (the language of the imperial overlords until 1917). He answered to both Misha, the Russianised diminutive of his name, and Mischka, the German one. In childhood, he was Hungarian by citizenship, although he rarely expressed any affinity for that country. Finally, according to

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<sup>1</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

whispered family lore and Fitzpatrick's own archival digging, it seems more likely than not that his father was Jewish, the son of German-speaking converts to Catholicism whose surname Danos had originally been Deutsch. The likelihood that Mischka had a Jewish background becomes significant later in his story, when his voluntary relocation to Dresden during the war raises the question of how he could have put himself into such clear personal danger.

Mischka's childhood was marked by study, athletics and a brooding sense that Riga was a backwater that he would need to leave to make his mark on the world. Fitzpatrick recalls feeling the same way growing up in Melbourne. The aura of sleepiness was shattered, however, with the outbreak of World War II. For Latvia, in the wake of the Molotov-Rippentrop pact, this meant occupation by the Soviet Union from 1940. This was a time of arbitrary terror that marked the Danoses' lives—for example, two of Mischka's cousins were arrested and deported to the Gulag. This regime was soon replaced, however, by Nazi occupation in the context of Operation Barbarossa. While no supporters of the Nazis, for Mischka and his family German occupation seemed less random, menacing and violent than that of the Soviets. This was in part Hitler's explicit plan: the Baltics were given a high degree of autonomy compared to other occupied lands, due to the supposed cultural 'closeness' of the region to Germany. It was also, of course, a result of the fact that the Danoses did not (on paper) belong to the group of people most targeted by the violence of the Nazi regime, namely Riga's Jewish inhabitants. Whether Mischka and his family were aware of their Jewish heritage or not, they do not seem to have felt worried about it during the war years. Olga, Mischka's mother and the book's second major 'character', took in Jews from the Riga Ghetto to work for her tailoring shop, which offered them some measure of protection. Her own sister was sent to a concentration camp for hiding Jews in her apartment, and Mischka had the harrowing experience of happening upon a Jewish mass grave in the woods in 1943. But, with the exception of these brushes with genocide, everyday life—Fitzpatrick's persistent focus—continued in a surprisingly normal fashion.

All this would change with the imminent threat of conscription to the Waffen-SS, whose Latvian Legion was created in 1943. Sensing the danger of enlistment into the Nazi war machine, Olga found a loophole that would get at least one of her sons out. The German government had recently set up a study exchange program that allowed Latvians (among others) to study at universities in the Reich. Here was Mischka's ticket from wartime Riga, but it necessitated him going into the jaws of the beast. Always eager to further his physics study, Mischka appears to have departed relatively willingly, albeit it was a wrench to leave his family. His mother also managed to escape in 1944 by moving her tailoring business to the Sudetenland; his father and two brothers were not so lucky. Mischka himself ended up in Dresden, where he experienced the Allied firebombing of the city in early 1945 and left a startling eyewitness account of the destruction that adds to the richness of

Fitzpatrick's book. Despite this horror, the impression one gets of Mischka's time in Nazi Germany is of the surprisingly quotidian nature of life. His time was marked by romantic entanglements and a holiday in the southern German mountains; despite his visceral disgust with the Nazi regime, Mischka maintained an attachment to the people he met there.

With the war over, Mischka and his mother became Displaced Persons (DPs) in Germany, refugees under the care of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Here, again, we have the opportunity to witness the interplay between Fitzpatrick's biographical focus and her broader research interests, which currently concern Soviet DPs. In what was becoming a pattern, Mischka and Olga's experience as DPs was rather singular. First, there was their status as Baltic subjects who had neither served with the Nazis nor been forcibly removed to Germany as slave labour, as had many other Eastern Europeans. Second, there was the fact that, although their home country was now in the Soviet Union (and most Soviet DPs were expected to be repatriated), the Allies did not recognise the Soviet annexation of Latvia and thus did not expect Mischka or Olga to return. Finally, at various points in time they were 'free-livers'—DPs who lived outside the camps and for whom UNRRA was only nominally responsible. In Mischka's case this was because he had recommenced university study, going on to do a PhD in theoretical physics at Heidelberg. For her part, the ever-resourceful Olga managed to restart her tailoring business even in the context of postwar scarcity. In the end, Mischka and his new wife Helga were among the last DPs to be resettled outside Germany in 1951. Despite initial reticence, the United States had recently begun accepting large numbers of refugees, and that is where the displaced Danoses found themselves at the dawn of a new decade.

In confronting the singularity of Mischka's experience in postwar Germany, Fitzpatrick directly addresses the value of studying individual lives as prisms into broader changes. Overall, she argues, the Danoses' experiences were not typical of DPs as a whole. 'But apart from the question of what was typical, there's the question of what was possible (that is, conceivable) within the parameters of DP experience' (p. 254). As a scholar who has spent much of her career tracing social change as a broad, proliferating phenomenon, the narrowing in to an individual life leads Fitzpatrick to ask new questions of a given historical moment, weighing what was possible against what was typical and what was singular against what was representative.

On a personal level, Fitzpatrick also confronts the question of how individual relationships influence scholarly investments. Throughout his life, Misha, as she called him, would assert that, while both were horrendous, the Soviet occupation of Riga was worse than that of the Nazis. His experience of the arbitrariness of Soviet violence would stay with him for life, and lead him to an understanding of Soviet society predicated on the ubiquity of fear. This interpretation looks much

like that proffered by the 'totalitarian school' of Sovietologists who wrote in the Cold War context of the 1950s and 1960s. These were the very scholars Fitzpatrick set herself against when she took to writing the social history of Stalinism, which emphasised that the banality of everyday life could coexist with violence and terror. Yet Misha would become her greatest defender when they married, and Fitzpatrick proudly recounts how vigorously he decried the 'assassins' who criticised her work. And indeed, she notes that, later in life, Misha himself came to believe that 'in the Soviet Union, material shortages of just about everything, from shoes to housing, were more on most people's minds than fear' (p. 50). This was the central argument of her book *Everyday Stalinism*. Who influenced whom, the historian or the eyewitness? In asking this, Fitzpatrick raises important questions about the relationship between our lives and the stories we tell about them, at the same time as offering a moving and gripping memorial to her beloved husband.

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