



## The Holy Thief

*William Ryan*

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Moscow, 1936, and Stalin's Great Terror is beginning. In a deconsecrated church, a young woman is found dead, her mutilated body displayed on the altar for all to see. Captain Alexei Korolev, finally beginning to enjoy the benefits of his success with the Criminal Investigation Division of the Moscow Militia, is asked to investigate. But when he discovers that the victim is an American citizen, the NKVD—the most feared organization in Russia—becomes involved. Soon, Korolev's every step is under close scrutiny and one false move will mean exile to The Zone, where enemies of the Soviet State, both real and imagined, meet their fate in the frozen camps of the far north.

Committed to uncovering the truth behind the gruesome murder, Korolev enters the realm of the Thieves, rulers of Moscow's underworld. As more bodies are discovered and pressure from above builds, Korolev begins to question who he can trust and who, in a Russia where fear, uncertainty and hunger prevail, are the real criminals. Soon, Korolev will find not only his moral and political ideals threatened, but also his life.

William Ryan's remarkable debut will storm into ten countries in what is sure to be an international publishing event. With Captain Alexei Korolev, William Ryan has given us one of the most compelling detectives in modern literature, a man dogged and humble, a man who will lead us through a fear-choked Russia to find the only thing that can save him or any of us—the truth.

## The Holy Thief Details

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Author : William Ryan

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## From Reader Review The Holy Thief for online ebook

### WarpDrive says

I rarely give works of fiction a 5-star rating. But in this case I was compelled to do so.

Superbly narrated, richly atmospheric, with a great sense of place and period (Moscow 1936, during the Stalin's Great Terror period), and mostly with believable characters, this book has been a very enjoyable reading experience. The plot is admittedly a bit predictable, but this does not detract from its enjoyment. I am going to explore more of this author's books.

Highly recommended, especially if you are interested in recent Russian history.

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### Paul says

Good story, nice to read about somewhere else in the world. A good detective story, certainly not the biggest climax, but well written. Had to read the names over a few times, not use to Russian names. I did notice a few items related to the north america experience, certainly smoking was very prominent, everyone with stylish hats and the era of music, Jazz which fits the time period of 1936.

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### Sarah says

At the book's heart is Captain Alexei Korolev of the Moscow Militia CID. When a girl is found murdered in a deconsecrated Moscow church, he struggles with his sense of outrage at the brutality of the killing and the ramifications for his career and indeed his life when it becomes apparent that the Russian hierarchy are taking an interest in the investigation. The victim is identified as an American citizen with an interest in Russian icons and is therefore deemed 'political' by the Moscow NKVD, the forerunners of the KGB. As more bodies emerge, Korolev also has to delve into the world of the 'Thieves', the Moscow underworld with their trademark killings and twisted honour to bring the case to a resolution of sorts.

Set in 1936 Moscow at the start of Stalin's purges, this turned out to be a different book than I had expected to read. Details of the purges were there, with even police officers fearing for their lives, but the focus of the book was on the Moscow underworld and, interestingly, the trade in icons being sent out of Russia. The role of the Orthodox Church during the Soviet era is something I know nothing about and the book details how Russian émigrés arranged for icons and other religious artefacts to be sold to buyers in the United States with the collusion of the Soviet state who wanted them removed. This aspect of the plot doesn't dominate but I found it fascinating how Korolev struggles with his Soviet atheistic convictions and his instinctive respect towards holy buildings and artefacts.

The police investigation has its own twists and turns as Korolev is himself watched by the fearful NKVD and some police personnel die in mysterious circumstances. Korolev is an interesting character with plenty of room for development over future books. His relationship with the pathologist Dr Chestnova in particular is well done. But what made this book stand out for me was intelligent writing married to an interesting plot set in a fascinating period. There are a few brutal passages that I winced over but given the period setting and cast of characters did not seem gratuitous.

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### **Maria Clara says**

Realmente me ha gustado. Es una muy buena novela sobre Rusia y su particular visión del mundo.

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### **ZaBeth Marsh says**

As I was reading *The Holy Thief* I realized that Korolev reminds me of James Garner's TV character in *The Rockford Files*. Both investigators just want to do their job and yet every assignment somehow gets horribly complicated. Both investigators want to do the right thing, and yet sometimes that means going outside the law. And both characters have been matured by life and yet still have a sense of optimism and humor. Ryan writes of a difficult political time in Russian history that can only be described with dread and yet the author is available to show how even at the worst of times people find humor and friendship that binds them together regardless of their struggles.

One of the things I found most interesting in this first book was Ryan's obvious powers of observation. Korolev notes several times throughout the book how another character, Babel – who is a writer –watches people. Babel goes on to explain that writers are interested in how people do things. I feel this must be true of Ryan as well as he seamlessly adds small physical movements and character details into the story so that his characters come alive. You can feel their stress and the wear of life on them, but also you can feel the heartbeat of hope within them and their will to survive. It makes for a very enjoyable read.

Another interesting thought about Ryan's work is that he has used children in both books as key supporting characters. Whether it is little Natasha who has clearly adopted Korolev as a father figure, the little redhead orphan Kim Goldstein who has a great future as a thief already established, or a child actor who uses a movie set as his playground, Ryan portrays children with maturity beyond their years. Maybe it is a nod to the historical period they live in where children must grow up quickly to survive, but it is also an efficient use of characters. Ryan gets the most out of every character he introduces regardless of their age and that makes for a very rich reading experience.

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### **Cphe says**

A police procedural set in the Soviet Union in the early 1930's. The mystery component was well presented overall although it didn't require any great stretch of the imagination to guess how it would all unfold.

Really enjoyed the atmosphere and of course the setting of the novel. However found myself drawn to the mysterious Count Kolya, head of the shadowy "Thieves". This is one novel where I felt the secondary characters were just a shade more interesting than the main.

I keep searching but I've yet to find a main character in this setting that comes close to the enigmatic Arkady Renko.

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## **Maria Altiki says**

Το συγκεκριμ?νο βιβλ?ο το δι?βασα και 2η φορ? ευχ?ριστα. Η ατμ?σφαιρα της εποχ?ς περιγρ?φεται αρκετ? καλ? κατ? την γν?μη μου. Ρωσ?α και συγκεκριμ?να Μ?σχα την εποχ? που ο Στ?λιν ξεκιν?ει την μεγ?λη εκαθ?ριση λοιπ?v. Η πε?να, η εξαθλ?ωση, ο φ?βος, η απογ?ρευση των θρησκευτικ?v πεποιθ?σεων. Το κ?ριο θ?μα στο βιβλ?ο θα ??λεγα πως ε?ναι η παρ?νομη μεταφορ? ?ργων τ?χνης αλλ? και θρησκευτικ?v κειμηλ?ων εκτ?ς της χ?ρας. Και πιο συγκεκριμ?να ??χονμε την ιστορ?α της περ?φημης εικ?να της Παναγ?ας του Καζ?ν, κοιν?ς την Καζανσκ?για, πολ? ιερ? και θαυματουργ? εικ?να της Παναγ?ας, προστ?τιδας ??λης της Ρωσ?ας αλλ? και των ληστ?v, που μεταφ?ρθηκε στην Αμ?ρικη και πουλ?θηκε σε αμερικ?νικη οικογ?νεια. Σ?γουρα θα διαβ?σω σ?ντομα και τα επ?μενα της σειρ?ς. Τον συμπαθε?ς πολ? ε?κολα τον Κ?ρολεφ!

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## **Mal Warwick says**

With *The Holy Thief*, William Ryan joins Martin Cruz Smith (the *Arkady Renko Series*) and Tom Rob Smith (the *Child 44 Trilogy*), whose compelling crime novels have illuminated the dark recesses of the Soviet Union (or, later, Russia).

However, Ryan's new contribution is set not in the 1950s, the 80s, or more recently, as are those of the two Smiths, but in the 1930s during the peak of Stalin's wide-ranging purges of the Communist Party and the military. It's unusual for a novel to include a list of sources, but *The Holy Thief* ends with a long one, testament to the thoroughness with which Ryan approached his subject. The picture that emerges is much darker than those painted by the two Smiths — which is only natural, since untold millions died on Stalin's orders in the 1930s.

What's most distinctive, and most rewarding, about this engrossing novel is the adroit way Ryan conveys a sense of the pervasive paranoia fostered by Stalin's reign of terror. The abject poverty of the USSR comes through clearly as well. Yet all of this is shrugged off by all but a handful of freethinkers. Virtually everyone else is convinced that the Soviet system will triumph under the brilliant leadership of Josef Stalin and all will be well in a future Communist state. Judging from the popularity of Vladimir Putin in today's Russia, it's not hard to believe the acceptance of Stalin's lies. Putin doesn't have on his hands the blood of millions, and his government falls short of totalitarianism, but the kleptocracy over which he presides matches the scale of Stalin's regime.

The story is complex. It's 1936. A young woman turns up the victim of a gruesome murder in one of the few churches left standing in Moscow. Detective Captain Alexei Dmitriyevich Korolev of the Moscow Militia's Criminal Investigation Division is called to the scene. (The Militia, the Soviet counterpart to Scotland Yard, is the junior partner to the much-feared NKVD — predecessor to the KGB — within the state security apparatus.) Shortly after undertaking his investigation into the baffling crime, Korolev is approached by a Colonel Gregorin, one of the most senior officers in the NKVD. Gregorin volunteers the information that the murdered woman is of Russian birth but American citizenship. She is an Orthodox nun, Gregorin explains. It soon transpires that the nun was apparently part of a conspiracy to steal a highly prized icon and spirit it away to the US, safe from the predations of the Soviet government. Then a second murder victim, a Thief, surfaces at a soccer stadium, clearly butchered by the same person. (The Thieves are a tightly knit network of murderers, rapists, and other violent criminals who essentially run the prisons in the Gulag and lord it over

lesser underworld figures in Russia's cities.) Somehow, the two murders are connected — and Korolev must figure out how.

The Holy Thief is suspenseful and full of surprises. Any fan of crime novels, detective fiction, or thrillers — or, for that matter, historical fiction — will likely find this book rewarding.

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### **James Thane says**

In 1936, Captain Alexei Korolev is a rising star in the Criminal Investigation Division of the Moscow Militia. He's called to the scene of a murder in a former church that now serves as a community center. There, a young woman has been tortured to death on the (former) altar. Korolev, is shocked by the brutality of the crime and by the fact that it occurred in the former church. Although a devoted citizen of the new Soviet Union, Korolev still has some religious inclinations and hides a Bible beneath the floorboards of his small bedroom.

Alexie soon discovers that the victim is an American and a nun, and given the political implications of the crime, Col. Gregorin of the NKVD takes an interest. It soon becomes apparent that something very deep and sinister is going on here. Alexei must report everything he learns to Gregorin, but it's a one-way street. Gregorin clearly has information that Korolev believes would be useful to his investigation, but Gregorin is obviously holding back, claiming that he is protecting important state secrets.

Korolev is determined to solve the crime, even if it means overstepping the limits placed on his activity. He becomes entangled with elements of the Moscow underworld and before long, places himself at great physical and political risk.

This is a well-told story, although most readers will see where it's going early on. But what's really fascinating is the character that Ryan has created in Alexei Korolev. Korolev, a veteran of the harsh fighting in World War I, is not naive. But he does truly believe that, despite all the problems the country and its citizens are suffering at the moment, the Soviet Union will soon be a model for the rest of the world to emulate. He's also ready to accept the fact that sacrifices must be made to attain that goal and that the authorities might sometimes have to take actions that would otherwise seem inexplicable and indefensible.

Alexei Korolev is a good man caught up in the machinations of a deeply troubled authoritarian state. And, unfortunately, things are not about to get better. The reader knows that just ahead are the horrors of Stalin's purges and the Second World War, all of which will make the suffering that Alexei and his fellow citizens suffer in 1936, seem like child's play. Alexei, of course, cannot see them coming and the reader can only shudder at the thought of what's waiting for him just around the bend.

This book was originally published in England and I wound up with a numbered signed first edition. All the more disappointing then, is the fact that this is the most poorly manufactured book I have bought in some time. The binding feels cheap and the pages are rippled. It looks for all the world like someone dumped it in a tub of water and then set it out to dry in the sun. I assume that this didn't happen, but this is certainly not a good advertisement for the publisher.

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## Antonomasia says

This - along with a number of solid history tomes and some Russian literature - was on the introductory reading list for a Masters module on Soviet and recent Russian history. [Before friends ask, I'm not actually studying it, but I would if in more suitable circumstances and able to afford it comfortably.] With this provenance, the historical accuracy would probably be a cut above your average detective novel set in the past. I also got into reading Nordic thrillers the same way, beginning with some that were on an old UCL Scandinavian Studies reading list.

And everything about the general atmosphere and background behaviour of characters rings true with what I've read previously about Stalinist Russia. As in all but the most ploddingly realistic of procedurals, there are scenes that stretch credulity a bit, but having a main character with a history of dumb luck certainly helps. Besides it was often thanks to improbable luck that real people survived times like that. It does feature some scenes of torture, but, because they fit the setting completely, I find them less unpleasant and gratuitous than in a contemporary mystery about a serial killer written just for the hell of it. It's interesting to see how the traditional fictional detective template (Korolev is divorced, in his forties and doesn't mind a drink) is adjusted to the environment of Russia in 1936, because no one could really be too much of a maverick and get away with it, and it would be too ridiculous to pretend otherwise.

This is better written than the average procedural, though it's still not one for those who insist only on the very finest of writing. I thought the author struck the right balance in using his research without excess infodumping, interesting, a bit of exposition for the reader unfamiliar with some of the circumstances, but not overly forced, (and there's a great list of books in the back about daily life under Stalin). The main irritation was the amount of physical description of characters. New person appears, we get a paragraph on what they look like. It's not sexualised or overly idealised; there's just too great a quantity. But at least it doesn't use characters looking into mirrors as a device. Readers who get tired of sexism in historical mysteries may be pleasantly surprised that there's very little here, without its making a point of being overly modern. It also doesn't let the reader get too comfortable: the characters whom, in a contemporary procedural, you'd look forward to seeing in the next book... not all of them survive; they wouldn't have. It also manages to have more nuance than many would write in fiction about this era, as there are some more reasonable individuals among the police and Chekha; it's not as if everyone except the protagonist is evil, and some characters turn out to have dimensions you wouldn't expect. (Although the basics of one plotline proved guessable.)

Isaac Babel is a supporting character with a significant role. I have only read his Odessa Stories, so I'm not sure how much Ryan is paying tribute to Babel for having inspired some of *The Holy Thief* via later stories set in Moscow. If he was, I thought it was quite elegantly done. It's an affectionate and characterful portrayal of the writer, so I would think that as a fan one would have to be rather humourless to mind it, and also to have missed the point of a genre novel like this one.

Sometimes wondered if I ought to give it 3/3.5 because not everyone I know on GR would think it their cup of tea, but there are two people to whom I'd actively recommend it (for the combination of procedural and Russian history) - and I enjoyed it throughout, and was looking at others in the series before I was anywhere near finished.

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## **Travis says**

In general, I enjoy novels about Soviet-era Russia - books like Gorky Park, Child 44, etc. which is what originally lead me to this novel. I felt this novel was very well done with strong, well-rounded main characters. What I found different (and very interesting) was Korolev's general attitude towards the State apparatus. In other novels of this era, the characters all seem to be moral upstanding men who are stuck in a bad position because of the Communist leaders and try to make the best of it - but most of them seem to secretly hate the State. Korolev (at least for most of the novel) isn't like that. He sees things for what they are, he is moral and has his own code, but he also has an almost child-like faith in the State and in Stalin that things are only this way because the revolution hasn't finished. That they all need to just bare with it and things will soon be paradise on Earth. Overall, I enjoyed the murder mystery aspect and watching Korolev investigate an ever-widening conspiracy. Very entertaining read - I will be reading more books by William Ryan.

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## **Marleen says**

Copy received from the Author.

Alexei Korolev is a criminal investigator with Moscow's Militia in 1936. When he is told to investigate the murder of a young woman who was found, horribly mutilated, in a disused church he has no idea how much trouble he is going to end up finding himself in.

Although this is a criminal investigation, a political investigator from the NKVD takes an active interest in the case and the investigation, demanding daily updates from Korolev and providing titbits of information when he feels like it.

When it turns out the woman was American, the case gets a whole lot trickier. And then another body is found, mutilated in a similar way but this time the victim is a member of the Thieves, the rulers of Moscow's underworld. Now the case is not only a political minefield but also highly confusing. What could possibly be the connection between the American woman and the seasoned criminal?

Korolev and his young partner Semionov slowly gather clues and try to make sense of them while around them political power-games are played out and one false move on their part could send them into exile or an even worse end.

This was a very good mystery. Korolev is a plausible main character. He is likeable, but not too good. He really wants to be a loyal communist and believe in the system, although he's not blind to its faults and has some feelings which don't quite fit the new doctrine.

A credible picture is painted of the fear and uncertainty that ruled everybody's lives in those days, although it doesn't make this a depressing read.

The mystery itself is well plotted and credible. The story provides tension as well as lighter moments in exactly the right balance and the pace of the story makes this a book that is very hard to put down.

I haven't read any other reviews for this book, but without a doubt comparisons will have been made to Tom Rob Smith's trilogy. And to some extent those comparisons would be right. However, I prefer this story over the ones by Smith.

While Smith's books felt more like political stories built around a man who happened to be an investigator, this is first and foremost a mystery, despite its setting. Underneath it all, the book is about a police detective trying to solve horrendous murders as best he can despite the circumstances he has to investigate under and

the political minefield he finds himself in.

And although the politics of the time and the ways in which they determine what people can say, do and even think are always present, the mystery remains the main focus of the story. And that for me made this book a fascinating and riveting read.

I'm going to have to get my hands on the next Korolev mystery, *The Bloody Meadow*, real soon. This is a mystery series I will be following faithfully from now on.

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### **Theresa de Valence says**

**THE HOLY THIEF** by William Ryan © 2010 was captivating with some clever twists.

For years I've complained that anyone whose life was not solely focused on a story would benefit from the help of a Cast of Characters, maps, and an index. Most memorably, William Tapply wrote that the presence of a Cast of Characters was an indicator to him of a poorly written book. **THE HOLY THIEF** is a case in point, and it's further complicated by the apparent Russian tendency to use the last, first and middle names in various combinations depending upon the intimacy between speakers. As it was, my attention skipped over any number of names whose history and relevance I couldn't quite remember.

The setting is Moscow in 1936 where persecution of anti-Communists is pervasive and ordinary citizens are terrorized. Further, it's the onset of winter and nobody has quite enough to eat or wear. Truthfully, this is an utterly miserable place to visit. If this is reasonable portrayal of pre-war Soviet Union, then I'm demmed glad to be an impoverished capitalist. Fair warning: the crimes are gruesome.

The most redeeming factor is the protagonist, Captain Alexei Dimitriyevich Korolev of the Moscow CID, a man whose charm becomes more endearing as the story wends.

An usual story with a disturbing setting, but I'm glad I read **THE HOLY THIEF**.

Theresa de Valence

<http://www.reviewsbytdev.com/content/...>

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### **Liz Barnsley says**

Having recently been introduced to the writing of this author by the lovely Sophie when she sent me a review copy of his new novel coming later this year – *The Constant Soldier* – which I liked a little bit, maybe (Yes I know I'll shut up soon about it. Soon as in never) I immediately went and got his previous 3 novels. Because in book love as in real love sometimes you just know.

*The Holy Thief* is a very different type of story, but turns out that *The Constant Soldier* was not a fluke so I refer you back to the “sometimes you just know” comment.

Anyway that aside, admittedly I know little to nothing about Stalin's Russia or that time period in general so the world that William Ryan threw me into here was entirely intriguing, brand new and utterly compelling.

Also very very scary, violently intense and the writing here once again is so beautifully immersive that reading it felt like it was right now in the moment. I LOVE books that can do that. Bookish deliciousness of the highest order.

Korolev as a character I just adored, was immediately engaged by and he just had such a layered and often conflicted personality that following along with him was a joy (although often very nail biting with an edge of worry and a touch of oh God) The Holy Thief is very much driven by the main protagonist, through whose eyes you get a real feel for the political landscape, the challenges people living there and then faced, the very real danger they were all in all of the time. Crime fiction with a heavy dose of brutal reality thrown in for good measure, taking you back in time in style – no need for that Delorean, just a pen and a touch of creative genius.

That would be enough but the story unfolding is incredibly addictive (and descriptive, blimey Mr Ryan thanks for THAT particularly vivid nightmare) and has enough twists and turns to keep the most avid crime fan happy. I'm not one for taking plots apart the next reader just needs the sense of it so I'll say – the scene setting is perfect, many thought provoking themes running through the narrative and overall just, you know, yes. All the Yes.

I'll be onto the next book in this series quick smart.

Highly Recommended.

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### **Speesh says**

A grisly murder. A Russian Detective in Moscow handed a hot potato of a case he knows he shouldn't take. Especially as it's 1936, you're 42, your boss is Stalin, and he's getting twitchy... But what are you gonna do? A nice new flat, is a nice new flat, no matter where it is, who you have to share it with and who might have just been kicked out of it to make way for you. When you're in favour, you learn to take what you can get, ask questions later and hope the answers are what your bosses want to hear.

There's been a murder. A horrible one (you're going to need some steely nerves, to read about the murders and murderer here), a ritualistic-looking murder in a deconsecrated church. In Moscow, of all places. Where religion isn't supposed to exist. Or is frowned upon at the best, can be bad for your career as well. Not something you shout about, or cross yourself while others are looking. But Korolev is a patient, careful, diligent and methodical man. A model Soviet citizen, by the looks of it ("The highest conviction rate in the division and you didn't even beat the convictions out of them"). However, he prays to the God the Soviets say doesn't exist. Just to be on the safe side, as it were. So, a mutilated woman is the case facing our Alexei Dimitrevich Korolev of the Criminal Investigation Division of the Moscow Militia. A case he knows is going to lead to problems and him into trouble. A case he knows he should run away screaming from. What could possibly go wrong? Oh yeah, the woman turns out to be an American. And the NKVD, the most feared of the most feared services in the new worker's paradise that is the early Soviet Union, are involved. But don't want any one to know. Unless they are crossed. But they're not going to tell you when that is.

The story builds slowly, the investigation takes time to get going. This is both because an investigation like that, at that time, would have taken time to get going, but also because William Ryan is (in case you didn't know it) getting started on a series of books about the investigative skills of Captain Korolev. So there's a lot of background work to be put in. About him and about the Russia he was working in. This is done very well

indeed. It did remind me of Sam Eastman's 'Red...' series I've read a couple of. They are perhaps even more bleak than these and his Inspector Pekkala has been a favourite of the Tzar's before becoming involved under Stalin. Korolev is further down the revolutionary pecking order, isn't working so closely with Stalin as Pekala, for example, and I don't remember if William Ryan described his pre-Revolution background. Maybe that's to come. Both are detectives and both are determined to solve the crime from the point of view that a murder has been committed, someone is responsible and they have been tasked with finding the perpetrator. They want to solve the crime without it spilling over into political recriminations. Though of course, in Soviet Russia of the 1930's, that is largely out of their hands.

Korolev is totally a product of the Revolution. He supports it, enthusiastically, not in the ways you're thinking, but perhaps more in its original principles and aims. Though I get the feeling, that William Ryan has intended that Korolev is behind the Revolution for what he, Korolev, thought it was for and would lead to. He hasn't quite got to grips with what it became under Stalin. He is realistic and he sees signs of course ("The hotel might be owned by the People, but that didn't mean the People were crazy enough to visit it"), he's not an idiot and not blind, but seems still to be operating in something of a Revolutionary 'glow.' That's the impression I got from his character anyway. It's one I look forward to seeing develop in future Korolev stories. Other comparisons, in terms of the level of assimilation into Russian/Moscovian life in the 1930's under Stalin can and should be made with the masterly work of David Downing. While Downing is of course in Germany before and during (so far for me) the Second World War, that is only a couple of years later than when this book is set, don't forget. While I don't think William Ryan is up to David Downing levels just yet, but he shows all the signs of getting there, quickly. I can't praise the book higher than that.

It really felt a little like the start of a series, where there's a lot of background and character work to be done and the story, or the danger/excitement/tension levels suffer a little as a result. Having said that, the scenes in the Lubyanka prison and some of the various confrontations were extremely tense and very well done. If anything, it showed that in Stalin's Russia, at that time anyway, the criminals were a lot more dependable, predictable and honest in a way, than those working for a better future for the proletariat.

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