BOOK REVIEWS

Maaza Mengiste, *The Shadow King*
New York: Norton, 2019
448 pages, $26.95, ISBN 9780393083569

One of the central themes in Maaza Mengiste's second novel, *The Shadow King*, is hiddenness. Combining history, myth, and legend, the title hints at what lurks in the shadows of Ethiopia and Europe in the war from 1935-1941, when Emperor Haile Selassie went into exile in England while Benito Mussolini's troops invaded his country. The central character, Hirut, hides much during her traumatic life, as Mengiste uncovers the untold history of female warriors in Ethiopia during this period.

Her novel is framed by a prologue ("Waiting") and an epilogue ("Reunion"), set in 1974 Addis Ababa, that both conceal and reveal. Seated in a corner of the train station with a metal box of memories on her lap, Hirut is careful "to hide the long scar that pushes at the base of her neck and trails over her shoulder like a broken necklace." This scar is part of her personal history of sexual abuse and exploitation; it also alludes to the scars of other Ethiopians who experienced similar torture. Inside the box are photographs and forty years of memory. She delivers them to Ettore, the Italian photographer, with his own hidden European history that overlaps with her victimization. Names, frames, and photographs reveal what has been concealed in Mussolini's fascist, imperial designs and in Mengiste's lyrical, epic prose.

From the three epigraphs by Homer, Isaiah, and Aeschylus, the novel aspires to epic proportions, incorporating Hellenistic and Hebraic elements. Words from *The Iliad*—"hereafter we shall be made into things of song for men of the future"—prepare for the role of music in Mengiste's *Ethiopiad*. Women sing as they go to war, while the emperor listens to Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* (1871) from his safe location in Bath. Isaiah's words, "Woe to the land shadowing with wings which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia," point to the mythical shadow land illustrated on the maps on the page after the

epigraphs. The larger map shows details of the Ethiopian terrain, while the smaller inset map charts a course from Venice to Massawa through the Suez Canal. Hidden within this route of invasion, however, is the tragic trajectory of the photographer's Jewish family. The boot of Italy extends into the Mediterranean and steps southward into Africa, where Greek, Jewish, Italian, and Ethiopian tragedies converge.

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* alerts the reader to tragedy and the presence of the chorus throughout the novel: "Why the horror clashing through your music, / terror struck to song?" Mengiste sings of arms and the woman, the inherited rifle of Hirut, who becomes the unsung heroine from 1935-1974. Similarly, Mengiste presents the little-known history of Maria Uva, the "Pasionaria" of Port Said, who spurred on the Italian soldiers through song. Her musical accompaniment also serves as a catalyst for the Ethiopian women, led by Aster and her orphaned servant, Hirut. History and legend blur as Hirut studies the photograph of Maria singing the chorus of "Giovinezza" (the official hymn of the Italian National Fascist Party): "This is Maria Uva's moment and she is the center of the camera's gaze, Mussolini's beam of light casting herself across Africa's dark borders, ushering men toward greatness." Mengiste's counter-narrative becomes an encounter-narrative in transcontinental chiaroscuro.

Aside from the main narrative, a series of inset pieces highlight hidden Europe in the novel. "A Brief History of Jacques Corat" deals with European trade in Africa and the give and take of gunrunning. Exposed is a "worn Charleville 1777, manufactured in Charleville, Ardennes, birthplace of one Arthur Rimbaud, poet and gunrunner." The French foreigner, Le Ferenj, carries a photograph of poetry's *enfant terrible* into new territory of ancient places. Brief history has a longer history: "Born in Bordeaux, that famous city of wines, Montaigne, Montesquieu, and that tremendously profitable harbor where ships sailed for the coast of Africa on the Triangular Trade. Triangle: a figure composed of three straight lines and three angles, not necessarily equal."

Hidden inequality recurs in the interspersed sections of "Chorus" and "Interlude," which serve both as commentary and counter-narrative. The interludes focus on Selassie's interior life—particularly his infatuation with Aida. In a cave the emperor tries to discern "what it is that Aida has managed to keep hidden." The Ethiopian princess "did not know the duties of a splintered heart." Mengiste extends the shadows in the cave to cover the

splintered heart of darkness in Africa and Europe. As the Italians bomb Ethiopia with mustard gas, the emperor longs to return home, surrounded by his Bible, English dictionary, and Radio London. As Ethiopians are thrown to their death, he thinks of Daedalus and Icarus, hubris and flight. Selassie is also known as Jan Hoy and Teferie Mekonnen, and these names are part of a shadow life shared by his double, the peasant Minim, whose minimalist name means "nothing." The locals dress him to look exactly like the emperor so that this shadow king can inspire them in battle.

The other hidden European in the novel is the Jewish photographer, Ettore Navarra, also known as "foto," whose family history reveals a different trajectory of oppression. As fascism takes root in Italy, his identity is questioned, even though he and his parents aren't believers. The photographer's identity gradually unfolds: as he is about to depart for Africa, his father Leo reminds him of the story of Daedalus and the labyrinth, and this mythical parent-child relationship is woven into Mengiste's own labyrinthine narrative. In Ethiopia, Ettore finally receives a letter from Leo and realizes that his father "has hidden himself between the words." Having left Odessa as a Jew after the pogroms of 1905 and entered Venice as an atheist, his father writes that "we are seekers of boundaries." Leonardo Navarra was born Lev Naiman, then Leonid Nevsky; his first life is destroyed in pogroms, his second in the Holocaust.

Hidden between words and boundaries, Hebraic and Hellenic traditions, Europe and Africa, light and shade, *The Shadow King* covers and uncovers much territory.

—Michael Greenstein

Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History*
New York: Knopf, 2019
624 pages, $37.50, ISBN 9780525656043

Julia Lovell's *Maoism: A Global History* won the Cundill History Prize. That means a prize committee has already done the first job of a reviewer: to judge the book's merit. *Maoism* is a serious book, beautifully written, worth reading.

Now to the second job: to help the busy reader decide where to place this worthy book on the infinite list of things to read. Its extraordinary breadth

drew me into a fascinating array of related histories. Lovell's first four chapters give us her definition of Maoism and a narrative of its origins in China through to the end of the Cultural Revolution. The next seven chapters tell the often-horrifying stories of Maoism in Indonesia, Africa, Vietnam/Cambodia, the U.S./Europe, and three more countries with chapters of their own: Peru, India, and Nepal. Before concluding, she devotes a chapter to what Maoism now means in China—"Mao-ish China." Dependent, necessarily, on other scholars' work, Lovell has also done supplementary interviews for most of the chapters and, in the China chapters, brings her own archival research. It is a masterful work of synthesis, and the scope of the research is breathtaking.

Guiding us through Lovell's Brueghelian (sometimes Boschian) panorama of personalities, horrors, and networked events is a general thesis: "Maoism not only unlocks the contemporary history of China, but is also a key influence on global insurgency, insubordination and intolerance across the last eighty years." Historians of the western left understand this. So do historians of Zimbabwe, Peru, and all the other places where her stories go. And yet she is surely right that juxtaposing these stories shows this Chinese political movement to have been a world-shaping force.

A few specifics will help to illustrate the book's strengths. Lovell's blended background in literature and history equipped her to notice something that others might not, which is the role that books played in making these initially local politics global. The foundational text of global Maoism was not *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (also known as *The Little Red Book*, 1964) but rather Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* (1937), and Lovell describes how Snow was seduced and manipulated into making a small-time Communist leader into a global celebrity. The Chinese translation of *Red Star* was a blazing success, fuelling Maoism at home, and it was also translated into many other languages, which helped to make Mao's strategy and tactics meaningful to the countless other insurgents who deployed Maoism in extraordinarily varied circumstances. Later, William Hinton's *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village* (1966) inspired a new generation to see in Maoism a communism for rural peasants, for whom the class enemy to be pulled down was rural landowners rather than financial or industrial capitalists.

Lovell richly shows how the meaning of these texts was made by events in time. She begins with a chapter of definition—"What is Maoism?"—but

each chapter shows a different Maoism, shaped by circumstances and characters. Ideas that had been produced in China for political purposes in the 1930s and 1940s were remade in the process (sometimes almost unrecognizably—Mao as a Buddha!). Maoism's inconsistencies provided abundant material for wildly divergent projects. From strictly disciplined campaigns of brutal violence, such as Zimbabwe's, to American feminist consciousness-raising groups, who "spoke bitterness," to Nepal's parliamentary Maoist parties competing for office—all could legitimately claim inspiration from Maoism.

My curiosity about the Canadian Maoists of my youth was especially satisfied by Lovell's exploration of how both voluntarism and authoritarianism are Maoist. Thousands of militants around the world took Mao's voluntarist lesson—some to mobilize the suffering peasantry and others to destabilize capitalism or smash the patriarchy. "Voluntarism" was thinking that anything is possible if you truly believe and go all in: "Dare to struggle, dare to win." A Canadian favourite was "a single spark can start a prairie fire." But the Canadian left also included Maoist authoritarianism: a commitment to the "correct line" and "exposing error," with truth and mistake vetted by party cadres and the infallible leader. These elements of Maoism gave unlimited warrant to abusers of power and ensured that the message of rebellion animated by moral choice was bundled with powerful pressures to conform.

In liberal North America, internecine battles over the "correct line" merely generated emotional cruelty (and political impotence). In other places, such as Peru, the consequences of authoritarianism were different and bloodier. The leader of the Shining Path guerillas not only wielded personal charisma; he could also throw around money and guns from China. Whatever the real virtues of "dare to win" and "expose errors" (courage and critical thinking), their dark sides (reckless delusion and callous humiliation, among others and worse) could both be found everywhere in global Maoism.

This book speaks to those who mourn the victims of communism and dismiss Maoism as a kitschy relic, but it does not simply confirm such facile positions. The horrible violence of the unfettered capitalism and race supremacy that Mao and Maoist insurgents challenged should neither be forgotten nor ignored in their present-day versions (whether Chinese or elsewhere). Lovell is also careful to remind us that ordinary community work

inspired by Maoist ideas and tactics sometimes gave force to just causes—feminism, anti-racism, even environmentalism—whose 1970s militants in Canada, as in the U.S. and Europe, were often Maoists. As with the North American communists of the 1930s and 1940s, however, there was much that the 1970s Maoists did not know about their political exemplar. Though revolutionary callousness was not unknown in the North American left of the 1970s, it was still plausible that these young idealists could not have known of the inexcusable cruelties that Mao and others had inflicted in the name of revolution. Lovell makes such innocence impossible. Hers is a Very Large Red Book that demands more of the reader than the famous little one, but (unlike the latter) it gets us beyond the correct line to the real workings of politics.

—Shirley Tillotson, Dalhousie University/University of King's College