

The EconomistThe Economist**Ryszard Kapuscinski**

Tapping out tales

The Polish journalist was inventive, clever, shifty—and highly gifted

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Ryszard Kapuscinski: A Life. By Artur Domszlawski. Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones. *Verso*; 464 pages; \$34.95 and £25. Buy from [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

(<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/184467858X/theeconomists-20>)

RYSZARD KAPUSCINSKI'S colourful writing, especially about Africa, gained him a global reputation in the early 1980s. He became celebrated for his descriptions of Haile Selassie's tenebrous court in Ethiopia, the overthrow of the shah of Iran, and for his knack of using vignettes of humble lives to tell big stories about poor countries.

He was also slippery about his own beliefs, careless with facts, a loyal servant of a totalitarian regime, and cruel to those who loved him. That is the picture painted in Artur Domszlawski's compelling and controversial biography, published in Poland in 2010 and now in English.

Mr Domszlawski is not a doctrinaire anti-communist, for whom any collaboration with the regime is unforgivable treachery. Nor is he one of those who prizes the beauty of Kapuscinski's prose over his professional lapses. Mr Domszlawski was a friend of the great man; but resolved to treat his life as a subject for serious inquiry, setting out with an open

mind and detailed knowledge, and adding more insights and evidence along the way.

The result is an exemplary explanation of what made Kapuscinski tick. Growing up in Pinsk, in the (now lost) eastern borderlands of pre-war Poland, he was caught between the hammer and the anvil in the war years. The hungry little boy learned that the brave die first. He saw neighbours tortured by the Nazis and others deported by the Soviets. He later claimed (untruthfully) that his father had escaped death at Katyn, where the Soviets killed more than 20,000 captured Polish officers and reservists. But why did Kapuscinski, so insightful about others, never give his own views on Stalin? Or on his decades as a communist-party member? He joined as a youth and left only in 1981.

The experience of arbitrary power and then political change at home did much to shape his understanding of events abroad. His sympathy for victims of colonialism in Africa reflected Poland's captivity in the Soviet empire. His depiction of the absurdities of the shah's Iran was a clear critique of decaying Polish bureaucratic socialism.

Freedom and the hard currency to travel were rare privileges in the post-war decades. That meant loyalty. Kapuscinski joined the Solidarity cause in 1980. But he was no dissident. Communism was disappointing, but not diabolical. The system made mistakes, but they were "our mistakes," he argued.

Kapuscinski was not a typical foreign correspondent: he went on his first trip, to India, speaking no English. Unlike his glitzy Western counterparts, he travelled by bus and lived in cheap hotels. Covering wars, he sometimes carried a gun, and used it. He wrote regular confidential reports for the authorities and personally briefed the party's central committee. He sometimes sat on, or slanted, stories vital to the communist cause, such as Cuban involvement in the wars of southern Africa. He helped the Polish spy agency—not much, fans say, and no worse, perhaps, than Western journalists did on their side. But it all stains his reputation.

His personality is another puzzle. A modest manner belied a detachment that shaded into arrogance. He was a dreadful father. Absences and affairs tested sorely his wife's loyalty. Many who counted

him as a friend found they remembered how he listened, not what he confided.

A lack of self-confidence meant that he longed to be liked and hated saying no. That helped him keep powerful protectors who eased him through the thickets of Polish bureaucracy. It also led him, oddly, to cut passages in the American edition of a book that might have offended the CIA. He habitually sacrificed facts for effect. He never corrected false assertions that he had "befriended" Che Guevara and Patrice Lumumba. This hardly helped him in the unforgiving climate of post-1989 Poland.

The translation by Antonia Lloyd-Jones makes the sweep and tone of Mr Domoslawski's Polish readable, without sacrificing its curious, to English eyes, use of the present tense and rhetorical questions. Readers feel sympathetic to the man, though bleakly aware of his flaws. The playfulness of a gifted writer, however delicious to read, can have victims. For the living, exaggerations and inventions are hurtful, or worse, while the dead cannot complain. Having grown up in a system built on lies, it is odd that Kapuscinski did not have more regard for the truth.

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