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JOSEPH
STALIN

1879 - 1953

Stalin, whose original name was Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhughashvili, was for many years the dictator of the Soviet Union. He was born in 1879, in the town of Gori, in Georgia, in the Caucasus. His native language was Georgian—a very different language from Russian, which he learned later, and which he always spoke with a marked Georgian accent.

Stalin was reared in poverty. His father, a cobbler who drank excessively and beat his son brutally, died when Iosif was eleven years old. As a youth, Iosif attended a church school in Gori, and as a teenager, he attended a theological seminary in Tiflis; however, in 1899, he was expelled from the seminary for spreading subversive ideas. He joined the underground Marxist movement, and in 1903, when there was a party split, he sided with the Bolshevik wing. In the years leading up to 1917, he was an active party member, and was arrested at least six times.

(However, since his sentences were generally light, and since he managed to escape on more than one occasion, it seems possible that he was actually a double agent for part of that time.) It was during this period that he adopted the not inappropriate pseudonym "Stalin" (man of steel).

Stalin did not play a really major role in the Communist revolution of 1917. However, he was very active during the next two years, and in 1922, became Secretary General of the Communist Party. This post gave him a great deal of influence in the administration of the party and was a major factor in his success in the struggle for power that occurred after Lenin died.

It is clear that Lenin wished Leon Trotsky to be his successor. In fact, in his political testament, Lenin stated that Stalin was too ruthless and ought to be removed from his post as Secretary General. However, after Lenin's death in early 1924, Stalin succeeded in having Lenin's testament suppressed. Furthermore, Stalin was able to join forces with Lev Kamenev and Grigori Zinoviev, two important members of the Politburo, to form a "troika," or triumvirate. Together they succeeded in defeating Trotsky and his followers. Then Stalin, a genius at political infighting, turned on Zinoviev and Kamenev and defeated them. Having defeated the "left-wing opposition" (i.e., Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev, and their followers) in the power struggle, Stalin proceeded to adopt several of their main political proposals. Not long after that, Stalin turned on the leaders of the right wing of the Communist party—his erstwhile allies—and defeated them too. By the early 1930s, he was the sole dictator of the Soviet Union.

From this position of power, starting in 1934, Stalin unleashed a drastic series of political purges. The event that nominally set off those purges was the assassination, on December 1, 1934, of Sergei Kirov, a high Communist official and one of Stalin's advisors. However, it seems quite likely that Stalin himself ordered Kirov's assassination, partly in order to get rid of Kirov, but mostly in order to furnish a pretext for the purges that followed.

In the course of the next few years, a high proportion of the

men who had been Communist party leaders during the 1917 Revolution, and, under Lenin's administration, were charged with treason by Stalin and executed. Many of them openly confessed in large public trials. It was as if Thomas Jefferson, while President, had arrested most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, charged them all with treason, and executed them after their "confessions" in public trials. In 1938, the man who had headed the earlier purges, Genrikh Yagoda, was himself brought to trial, confessed to treason, and was duly executed. For that matter, his successor, Nicolai Yezhov, was also eventually purged and executed.

The purges of the mid-1930s extended throughout the Communist party and the Soviet armed forces. They were not directed primarily against anti-Communists or counter-revolutionaries. (Most of those had been crushed during Lenin's administration.) Rather, they were directed against the Communist party itself. Stalin was far more successful in killing Communists than the Czarist police had ever been. For example, of the members of the Central Committee elected at the Party Congress of 1934, more than two thirds were killed during the subsequent purges. From this, it is clear that Stalin's primary motive was to preclude the establishment of any independent power within the country.

Stalin's ruthless use of the secret police, and his program of arbitrary arrests and executions, and long terms in prison or labor camps for anyone even slightly critical of his rule, succeeded in cowering the population into submission. By the end of the 1930s he had created perhaps the most totalitarian dictatorship of modern times, a government structure which intruded into every aspect of life and under which there were no civil liberties.

Among the economic policies instituted by Stalin was the forced collectivization of agriculture. This policy was highly unpopular with the peasants, and many of them resisted it. In the early 1930s, however, by Stalin's orders, millions of peasants were either killed or starved to death, and in the end his policy prevailed.

Another policy that Stalin pushed was the rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union. This was accomplished in part by a series of "Five-Year Plans," since imitated by many countries outside the



Scene from one of the spectacular Russian treason trials of the thirties, which established Stalin's reputation as a tyrant.

Soviet Union. Despite various inefficiencies, Stalin's program of industrialization was, in the short run, a success. In spite of its enormous material losses during World War II, the Soviet Union emerged from that war as the world's second largest industrial power. (In the long run, though, the agricultural and industrial policies which he instituted have severely damaged the Soviet economy.)

In August 1939, Hitler and Stalin signed their famous "nonaggression" pact. Within two weeks, Hitler invaded Poland from the

west, and a few weeks later the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east and took over the eastern half of the country. Later that year, the Soviet Union threatened the three independent nations of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia with armed invasion. All three surrendered without a fight and were eventually annexed to the USSR. Similarly, part of Romania was annexed by the threat of force. Finland refused to submit to threats; however, a Russian invasion resulted in the conquest of Finnish territory. An excuse often given for these annexations is that the territory was needed by the Soviet Union for defense against the expected attack from Nazi Germany. However, when the war was over, and Germany thoroughly defeated, Stalin did not relinquish control over any of the occupied territories.

At the end of World War II, Soviet armies occupied much of eastern Europe, and Stalin utilized the opportunity to set up Communist governments, subservient to the Soviet Union, throughout that region. A Marxist government also emerged in Yugoslavia; however, as there were no Russian troops in that country, Yugoslavia did not become a Russian satellite. To prevent the other Communist countries in eastern Europe from following the Yugoslav example, Stalin had purges instituted in the east European satellite states. It was during the immediate postwar era that the Cold War commenced. Although some people have attempted to blame this on Western leaders, it seems abundantly clear that the principal cause of the Cold War was the expansionist policies of Stalin, and his implacable desire to spread the Communist system—and Soviet power—throughout the world.

In January 1953, the Soviet government announced that a group of doctors had been arrested for plotting the deaths of high-ranking Soviet officials. This sounded very much as if Stalin was planning still another set of sweeping purges. However, on March 5, 1953, the seventy-three-year-old dictator died in the Kremlin in Moscow. His body was preserved and put on display in a position of honor, next to the body of Lenin in the mausoleum in Red Square. In later years, however, Stalin's reputation was downgraded very sharply; and today he is generally abhorred as a tyrant throughout the lands he once ruled.

Stalin's family life was not very successful. He married in 1904, but three years later his wife died of tuberculosis. Their only child, Jacob, was captured by the Germans in World War II. The Germans offered to exchange him, but Stalin turned the offer down, and Jacob died in a German prison camp. In 1919, Stalin married a second time. His second wife died in 1932, reportedly by her own hand, although there have been rumors that Stalin himself killed her or had her killed. There were two children by the second marriage. The son, an officer in the Soviet Air Force, became an alcoholic. He died in 1962. Stalin's daughter, Svetlana, defected from the Soviet Union, and in 1967 came to the United States.

The outstanding characteristic of Stalin's personality was his total ruthlessness. No consideration of sentiment or pity seems to have influenced him in the slightest. He was also an intensely suspicious person, verging on paranoia. He was, however, an immensely capable man: energetic, persistent, and shrewd, with an unusually powerful mind.

As the dictator of the Soviet Union for approximately a quarter of a century, Stalin had a great deal of influence on a great many lives. In fact, if the overall influence of a dictator upon his own generation is deemed to be proportional to the number of people he controls, to the degree of his individual control, and to the time he remains in power, then Stalin was perhaps the foremost dictator in history. During his lifetime, Stalin sent millions of persons to their deaths, or to forced labor camps, or had them starved to death. (There is no way of knowing just how many people died as a result of his various purges, but it was probably in the neighborhood of 30 million.)

There is therefore no doubt that Stalin's short-term influence was immense. However, like his contemporary, Adolf Hitler (with whom he is often compared), it is unclear how great his permanent influence will be.

During his lifetime, Stalin expanded the borders of the Soviet Union, set up a satellite empire in eastern Europe, and transformed the USSR into a great power, with influence in every por-

tion of the globe. But in the past few years the imposing Soviet empire in eastern Europe has crumbled away, and the Soviet Union itself has fractured into fifteen independent states.

During Stalin's lifetime, the USSR was a vast police state. However, the fearful grip of the secret police was gradually curbed after Stalin's death. Today, Russians enjoy more individual liberty than at any time in their country's history.

Stalin's economic program was derived from the ideas of Marx and Lenin. But while Marx had suggested those policies, and Lenin had started to put them into effect, it was really Stalin who succeeded in largely eliminating private farming and private business enterprises within the Soviet Union. However, those policies have proven to be disastrous, and are now being abandoned entirely.

Despite this, I cannot help but feel that the foregoing greatly underestimates Stalin's overall influence. Joseph Stalin was not just another power-mad dictator who ruled a large country for twenty-five years. By instituting the Cold War, he dominated the history of the entire world for many years after he died. No war in history—not even World War II—had such a global effect as did the Cold War. It was not just the USSR and the USA which were affected: Every country on earth was caught up in the diplomatic and economic aspects of the struggle, and in many parts of the world there were shooting wars as well. The arms race between the two superpowers—which, although the largest and costliest arms race in history, was only one aspect of the struggle—cost many *trillions* of dollars. Worst of all, perhaps, for many years the entire world lived under the threat of a nuclear holocaust which might entirely destroy civilization.

The Cold War was widely detested, and most people devoutly wished for its end. But for decades the dead, denounced Stalin had more power—more actual effect on the world—than any living political figure. Of him, more perhaps than of any other man in history, it could truly be said that, "the evil that men do lives after them."

The Cold War is over now, and Stalin's pernicious influence may finally be ending. We should also remember that some of the blame for Stalin's crimes must be accorded to Lenin, who preceded Stalin and set the stage for him. Nevertheless, Stalin was one of the titans of history: a cruel genius who will not soon be forgotten.



Stalin meets with M.I. Kalinin, President of the Soviet Union 1923-1946.