

Joseph Stalin – Dictator of The Russian Revolution

It is said that no person in history had such a direct impact on the lives of so many as Joseph Stalin had during his lifetime. That impact was, almost without exception, ultimately negative. In Hitler's Germany, by comparison, if you were not one of the persecuted groups and tacitly supported the regime you were generally safe. In Stalin's Soviet Union, his Terror knew no limits, it did not discriminate: no one was safe, no institution, no single town or village was immune.

So, who was Joseph Stalin and what was his role during the Russian Revolution? How did he come to power? What made him such a destructive tyrant? And how did he impose his will on the Soviet Union for so long? This, in an hour, is the story of Joseph Stalin.

Stalin was born Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili in the small Georgian town of Gori, Georgia at the time being part of the Imperial Russian Empire, an empire constrained by feudalism and ruled by the autocratic and unpopular Romanov dynasty. His date of birth was the 18th of December 1878 but for reasons that remain a mystery, Stalin always maintained he was born on the 21st of December 1879 and it is this date that was celebrated throughout his life.

The RSDLP split into two factions in 1903 – Bolshevik and Menshevik. Stalin, an admirer of the writings of the lawyer and revolutionary, Vladimir Lenin, allied himself to the Bolshevik cause. His work at undermining the Mensheviks within Georgia and his involvement in a number of bank robberies in Tiflis to raise funds for the Bolsheviks, brought him to Lenin's attention. He first met the Bolshevik leader on the 7th of January 1906 at a party conference in Tampere, Finland. Lenin was impressed with Stalin, calling him the 'wonderful Georgian'. Lenin appointed him to the Bolshevik Central Committee in 1912, although this had to be carried out in absentia as Stalin was serving a jail sentence.

Revolution and Civil War

The outbreak of the First World War in July 1914 accelerated the collapse of Tsar Nicholas II's rule. Defeat on the Eastern Front, the loss of large swathes of Russia's western territory to Germany, food shortages and economic hardship took its toll on Russia's fragile infrastructure.

The February Revolution

In early March (late February by the Old-Style Julian Calendar), strikes broke out in Petrograd – the Tsar renamed St Petersburg to the less Germanic-sounding Petrograd in August 1914. Much of the population took to the streets and demonstrators formed councils of workers, or 'Soviets'. On the 15th of March, former members of the Duma, Russia's parliament, formed a Provisional Government. On the same day, Nicholas II was forced to abdicate. After 304 years, the Romanov dynasty was no more. The Tsar and his family were kept in various safe houses and were at Yekaterinburg in the Urals when Lenin finally ordered their murder on the night of the 17th of July 1918.

In July, demonstrations against the Provisional Government broke out in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks, feeling the time was not yet ready for an uprising, distanced themselves from the 'July Days' demonstrators. Leon Trotsky and other leading Bolsheviks were arrested – but not Stalin, who was considered of little importance. Stalin hid Lenin in the Alliluyev home and, advising Lenin to shave off his trademark beard, helped him disappear into hiding – first into some woods outside the city, then into Finland. In late October, Lenin returned to Petrograd and urged an immediate seizure of power.

The October Revolution

On the 7th of November (the 25th of October in the Old Style) the Bolsheviks' armed wing, the Military Revolutionary Council, commanded by Trotsky, took control of Petrograd, then overran the

Winter Palace, overthrowing the Provisional Government. The Soviets had obtained power. Lenin then ensured that the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries were sidelined and that effective power lay in the hands of the Bolsheviks only. Lenin then instituted the new government, the Council of People's Commissars, abbreviated as Sovnarkom. Trotsky was made the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, and Stalin, by dint of being a Georgian, was appointed the People's Commissar of Nationalities, established specifically to ensure that the former tsarist empire remained as one, resisting the demands for national self-determination.

Civil War

The Bolsheviks' hold on power was tenuous. Across Russia, groups opposed to Lenin's new autocracy joined forces to oppose by violent means the Bolshevik government. This jumbled alliance of ex-tsarist officers, monarchists, disillusioned socialists, and various ethnic groups – collectively the 'Whites', had nothing in common but its shared hatred of the Bolsheviks. As the Russian Civil War broke out, Stalin was appointed as a Political Commissar leading the defense of the city of Tsaritsyn (renamed Stalingrad in 1925 and now called Volgograd).

Stalin frequently clashed with Leon Trotsky, his military superior and recently appointed the People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs. Trotsky – who deservedly took much of the credit for winning the 'Reds' the Civil War – exploited the expertise and experience of former officers of the Tsar's army, holding their families' hostage to ensure their active participation. Stalin, who had no truck with anything related to tsarism – preferring to have them shot – devoted as much energy to fighting Trotsky's supporters as the Whites. He once, infamously, imprisoned a group of Trotskyites on a leaky barge on the River Volga and left them to drown.

Stalin's rise through the ranks of the Communist Party (the Bolshevik party had changed its name to the Russian Communist Party in March 1918) and onto ultimate power was impressive. He owed it all to the support of Lenin who, in March 1919, appointed him

to both the five-man Politburo, responsible for policy, and to the Orgburo, ‘organisational bureau’, which dealt with administrative matters and party personnel – such as appointing managers of regional party branches. It was in this latter role that Stalin’s methodical organization and indexing of members earned him the contemptuous nickname *Comrade Card Index*. But in their facetiousness, his rivals underestimated one of Stalin’s strengths – he got to know the blemishes on everyone’s records and, never one to forget a name, exploited this information to full effect. The top promotion came in April 1922, when Lenin, acting on a proposal put forward by Kamenev and Zinoviev, made Stalin General Secretary of the Communist Party’s Central Committee, a post he held until 1952, a year before his death.

Stalin, Lenin and Trotsky

Lenin soon regretted his haste in over-promoting Stalin, falling out with his General Secretary over the latter’s handling of Georgia. Originally, the Bolsheviks had promised the Russian nations self-determination but, once in power, they reneged on that promise, wanting to keep all nations of the former Russian Empire within the Soviet orbit. The Civil War had intensified these hopes and Georgia had enjoyed a brief spell of independence from May 1918 until February 1921 when the Red Army re-asserted Moscow’s control. Lenin advised a conciliatory approach, advice that Stalin, along with his fellow countryman, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, ignored by imposing a crackdown on Georgian autonomy and executing its leaders in 1922.

Lenin’s Testament

Lenin was furious with his ‘wonderful Georgian’ but in May 1922 he suffered the first of three strokes, greatly diminishing his ability to maintain command. In December of 1922, Lenin wrote his Testament, in which he commented on individual members of the Party’s Central Committee. His most damning

judgement was reserved for his General Secretary, whom he described as having

‘unlimited authority concentrated in his hands ... I am not sure whether he will always be capable of using that authority with sufficient caution’.

Stalin’s bullish behavior in Georgia was Lenin’s case-in-point. More damning still for Stalin was Lenin’s addendum to his Testament, written ten days later, in which he declared:

‘Stalin is too rude and this defect, although quite tolerable in our midst and in dealing among us Communists, becomes intolerable in a Secretary-General.’

The next day, 6 March 1923, Lenin suffered his third stroke, which left him bedridden and mute. He died ten months later, on the 21st of January 1924, aged fifty-three.

Stalin took the lead in organizing Lenin’s funeral and appeared as the chief pallbearer. Trotsky, who was recovering from illness near the Black Sea, missed the funeral – Stalin having deliberately told him the wrong date.

Stalin initiated the deification of Lenin, in which the great leader’s image was seen everywhere and his memory held in reverential terms. Within days of his death, Petrograd was renamed Leningrad. Stalin’s broken relationship with Lenin was quietly forgotten and he reinvented himself as the bearer of Lenin’s legacy. To doubt Stalin was to doubt Lenin and question the whole legitimacy of the Revolution.

Opposition

Kamenev and Zinoviev, motivated by their fear of the arrogant Trotsky, joined forces with Stalin and together the three men assumed unofficial leadership of the Party as a troika. Between them they managed to get the Central Committee to agree on suppressing Lenin's Testament. Stalin had offered to resign over the issue. The committee, including Trotsky, rejected his offer. They would all pay dearly for their support.

Trotsky and his supporters, labelled as the 'Left Opposition', opposed the party on many accounts and were attacked on all sides. Their views, 'Trotskyism', became a profanation of immense proportions. Stalin had on his side Kamenev, Zinoviev and Pravda editor Nikolai Bukharin, Lenin's 'favorite of the whole Party'.

Stalin used his power to dismiss his perceived dissenters within the Party and replace them with loyal followers. In January 1925, Stalin was strong enough to force Trotsky's resignation from his post of People's Commissar for War.

In January 1928, Trotsky was exiled to Alma Ata in Kazakhstan and in February 1929, expelled from the Soviet Union altogether. On 20 August 1940, he was attacked by a Stalinist agent, Ramón Mercader, with an ice pick at his home in Mexico and died the following day. At the time of the attack, he was writing his biography of Stalin.

Collectivization

During the Russian Civil War, Lenin had ordered the acquisition of the peasant's grain and livestock, losses which the peasantry could ill-afford; Eighty-five per cent of the Soviet Union's population lived off the land. He had also demanded the collectivization of farms, where peasants were obliged to surrender their land and crops, and their livestock, machinery and labor to the village – for the supposed benefit of all. 'Kulaks', peasants perceived as better-off, were to be destroyed: killed or deported. In effect, the loosely-defined kulak could be a peasant with an extra cow or half a

hectare, and were often the more efficient farmers. Their destruction caused widespread devastation and eventually famine.

In 1921, Lenin, realizing his mistakes, had found suitable scapegoats but nonetheless compromised by introducing his 'New Economic Policy', in which he allowed the peasantry to sell their goods on the open market for profit to aid the Russian economy devastated by years of revolution and civil war. In 1928, Stalin decided again to implement collectivization. Whereas Lenin recognized it could take generations to achieve, Stalin aimed at five years and, in the more important agricultural areas, such as the Ukraine, within two. At first, he envisaged a voluntary process, but with the peasantry unwilling to respond to his call, collectivization soon became compulsory. Anyone who resisted was to face the harshest penalties: 'Those who do not join the collectives are enemies of Soviet power'.

Famine

Famine took hold. Vast areas were affected – most appallingly in the Ukraine, where millions (possibly up to ten million) died in Stalin's man-made 'Terror famine', remembered in the Ukraine as the *Holodomor*, the 'killing by hunger'. Victims resorted to eating tree bark and even cannibalism, with cases of adults killing and consuming their own children. In 1932, the party introduced the Law of Spikelets to protect State property, so called because those guilty of stealing even handfuls of grain or 'spikelets' were liable to punishment by death or deportation. Watchtowers were erected to ensure starving civilians adhered to the new law.

Stalin's twin priority at this time was the success of his 'First Five-Year-Plan', introduced in 1928. To fund his overambitious industrial plan, Stalin exported millions of tons of grain – however, this was not surplus grain, but vitally needed grain. Lenin had similarly caused a famine in the Volga region in 1920–21 but at least he finally acquiesced, and allowed in foreign aid. Stalin refused to allow the world to see the result of his errors. No aid or relief was

sought. Spreading ‘misinformation’ about the situation was punishable by deportation.

Villages full of starving inhabitants were sealed off by roadblocks to prevent anyone getting in or out. When one Party member wrote to Stalin describing the horrific scenes of famine, Stalin admonished him for writing ‘fables’ and advised him that his writing skills would be better employed as a fiction writer. Western dignitaries were shown around carefully-prepared collectives where well-fed and enthusiastic villagers exclaimed the joys of living in Stalin’s utopia.