Stalin, Joseph

From Chambers Biographical Dictionary

originally

Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili

1879-1953

Soviet revolutionary and leader

Stalin was born near Tiflis (now Tbilisi) in Georgia, the son of a shoemaker. He was educated for the priesthood at the Theological Seminary, but was expelled, probably for propagating Marxism. He joined the Bolshevik underground, and was arrested and transported to Siberia, but escaped in 1904. The ensuing years witnessed his closer identification with revolutionary Marxism, his many escapes from captivity, his growing intimacy with Lenin and Nikolai Bukharin, his early disparagement of Trotsky, and his co-option, in 1912, to the illicit Bolshevik Central Committee.

With the 1917 Revolution and the forcible replacement of the Kerensky government by Lenin and his supporters, Stalin was appointed commissar for nationalities and a member of the politburo, although his activities throughout the counter-revolution and the war with Poland were confined to organizing a Red "terror" in Tsaritsin (later Stalingrad, and now Volgograd). With his appointment as General Secretary to the Central Committee in 1922, Stalin stealthily began to build up the power that would ensure his control of the situation after Lenin's death. When this occurred in 1924, he took over the reins, successfully testing his overriding authority in 1928 by engineering Trotsky's downfall.

Stalin's reorganization of the USSR's resources, with its successive five-year plans, suffered many industrial setbacks and encountered consistently stubborn resistance in the field of agriculture, where the kulaks, or peasant proprietors, steadfastly refused to accept the principle of collectivization. The measures taken by the dictator to "discipline" those who opposed his will involved the death by execution or famine of up to 10 million peasants (1932-33). The bloodbath which eliminated the Old Bolsheviks and the alleged right-wing intelligentsia was followed by a drastic purge of some thousands of the officer corps, who were accused of pro-German sympathies.

Red Army forces and material went to the support of the Spanish Communist government in 1936, although Stalin was careful not to commit himself too deeply. After the Munich crisis, Franco-British negotiations for Russian support in the event of war were drawn out to the point at which Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler, allowing him time to prepare for the German invasion he regarded as inevitable. In 1941 the success of the Nazis' initial thrust into Russia was partly due to the disposal of the Red Army on the frontiers, ready to invade rather than repel invasion. Eventually, the German invasion was defeated by a war of attrition, with the harsh Russian winter contributing to the enormous numbers of casualties.

Sustained by many millions of pounds' worth of war material furnished by Great Britain and the USA, the Red Army obediently responded to Stalin's call to defend Mother Russia, although the dictator lost no time in demanding a "Second Front" in Europe to relieve the strain on his unnumbered forces. Quick to exploit the unwarranted Anglo-American fear that Russia might withdraw from the alliance, Stalin easily
outwitted the allied leaders at the conferences at Teheran (1943), Yalta (1945) and Potsdam (1945), which left him in political control of most of Eastern Europe.

While Stalin consolidated his gains, an "iron curtain" cut off Soviet Russia and her satellites from the outside world. At the same time the Khozyain ("boss") inaugurated a ruthless "cold war" against all non-Communist countries, which included the blockade of Berlin. At home his ruthless purge of all opposition continued, and his fierce anti-Semitism resulted in 1952 in the execution of a number of Jews for alleged Zionist conspiracy.

Stalin was twice married and had three children: two sons and a daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva (1926- ). He died in mysterious circumstances; the official cause was said to be a brain haemorrhage.

Stalin's "cult of personality" and the brutal purges of his rule were denounced after his death by Nikita Khrushchev. In 1961, by a vote of the Party Congress, Stalin's embalmed body was removed from the Mausoleum of Lenin and buried in an ordinary grave near the Kremlin. Stalinism was more in favour under Leonid Brezhnev, but later Mikhail Gorbachev praised his wartime leadership and agreed that the strategy of collectivization was substantially correct, but admitted that Stalin had committed "unforgivable crimes" and had seriously distorted the Soviet political system. In 1988 Stalin's official biographer, Dmitri Volkognov, went further, castigating the September 1939 "friendship pact" with Nazi Germany, his resort to bloody purges and his reliance on incompetent advisers, and suggesting that the once revered leader may have been insane. Many of the opponents of Stalin who were found guilty in the 1930s show trials have since been posthumously rehabilitated.

"The State is an instrument in the hand of the ruling class, used to break the resistance of the adversaries of that class."

- From Foundations of Leninism (1924).

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