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JOSEPH STALIN

Joseph Stalin was the second leader of the Soviet Union. His real name was Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, and he was also known as Koba (a Georgian folk hero) to his closest sphere. The name "Stalin" (derived from combining Russian stal, "steel" with "Lenin") originally was a conspirative nickname; however, it stuck to him and he continued to call himself Stalin after the Russian Revolution. Stalin is also reported to have used at least a dozen other names for the purpose of secret communications, but for obvious reasons most of them remain unknown.

Childhood and early years

Born in Gori, Georgia to illiterate peasant parents (who had been serfs at birth), his harsh spirit has been blamed on undeserved and severe beatings by his father, inspiring vengeful feelings towards anyone in a position to wield power over him (perhaps also a reason he became a revolutionary). His mother set him on a path to become a priest, and he studied Russian Orthodox Christianity until he was nearly twenty.

His involvement with the socialist movement began at seminary school, from which he was expelled in 1899. From there on he worked for a decade with the political underground in the Caucasus. He soon followed Vladimir Lenin's ideology about centralism and a strong party of "professional revolutionaries". His practical experience made him useful in Lenin's Bolshevik party leading up to the 1917 October Revolution (in which he played no direct part).

In 1906, Stalin married Ekaterina "Kato" Svanidze (1885-1907), a seamstress. The couple had one son, Yakov (1907-1943), who died as a prisoner in Germany during World War II. Ekaterina perished from typhus when her son was an infant. In 1918 (some sources cite 1919), Stalin married his second wife, Nadezhda "Nadya" Alliluyeva (1901-1932), the daughter of a Russian revolutionary. They had two children, a boy and a girl. Nadezhda committed suicide in her early 30s. Stalin also fathered several children out of wedlock.

Rise to power

Stalin spent his first years after the revolution building his post as general secretary secretly into the most powerful one in the communist party. After Lenin's death in 1924, a triumvirate of Stalin, Kamenev, and Zinoviev governed against Trotsky (on the left wing of the party) and Bukharin (on the right wing of the party). Soon after, Stalin switched sides and joined with Bukharin. Together, they fought a new opposition of Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinoviev. By 1928 Stalin's supremacy was complete. From this year, he could be said to have exercised control over the party and the country (although the formalities were not complete until the Great Purges of 1936-1938).

The final stage of Stalin's rise to power was the ordered assassination of Trotsky in Mexico in 1940, where he had lived since 1936 (he was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1929.). Indeed, after Trotsky's death only two members of the "Old Bolsheviks" (Lenin's Politburo) remained - Stalin himself and his foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov.

Starting in the late 1920s, Joseph Stalin launched a series of five-year plans intended to transform the Soviet Union from a peasant society into an industrial superpower. His development plan was centered on government control of the economy and included the forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture, in which the government took control of farms

Purges and mass murders

Stalin consolidated his power base with the Great Purges against his political and ideological opponents, most notably the old cadres and the rank and file of the Bolshevik Party. Measures used against them ranged from imprisonment in work camps (Gulags) to assassination (such as that of Leon Trotsky and Sergei Kirov). Several show trials were held in Moscow, to serve as examples for the trials that local courts were expected to carry out elsewhere in the country. There were four key trials from 1936 to 1938, The Trial of the Sixteen was the first (December 1936); then the Trial of the Seventeen (January 1937); then the trial of Red Army generals, including Marshal Tukhachevsky (June 1937); and finally the Trial of the Twenty One (including Bukharin) in March 1938.

Under the pretext of constructing 'socialism in one country', Stalin terrorized large segments of the Soviet population, such as the Kulaks, a term for prosperous farmers who were disinherited when agriculture was collectivized. He also orchestrated a massive famine in the Ukraine in which an estimated 5 million people died. It is believed that with the purges, forced famines, state terrorism, labor camps, and forced migrations, Stalin was responsible for the death of as many as 40 million people within the borders of the Soviet Union. According to former National Security Advisor to US President Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Stalin murdered an estimated 20 million people.

World War II

In 1939, on the eve of World War II, Joseph Stalin and German dictator Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) signed a nonaggression pact.

In 1939, Stalin made the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany which divided Eastern Europe between the two powers. The official Allied version has been: In 1941, however, Hitler broke the pact and invaded the Soviet Union (see Operation Barbarossa). Under Stalin's leadership, the Soviet Red Army put up fierce resistance, but were ineffective against the advancing Nazi forces.

Stalin was up to this point very wary of the Germans, and would not permit his armies to even assume defensive positions for fear of sending the wrong signals to Hitler. Up to the final moment, and the invasion by the Germans, he held out hope that the Molotov-Rippentrop Pact would buy him time to modernize and strengthen his military (recently weakened by purges). The Germans reached the outskirts of Moscow in December, but were stopped by an early winter and a Soviet counter-offensive. At the battle of Stalingrad in 1942-43, after sacrificing an estimated 1 million men, the Red Army was able to regain the initiative of the war. With military equipment aid of their allies the Soviet forces were able to regain their lost territory and push their over-stretched enemy back to Germany itself.

From the end of 1944 large sections of eastern Germany came under Stalin's Soviet Union occupation and on May 2, 1945, the capital city Berlin was taken.

By some estimates, one quarter of the Russian population was wiped out in the war. There was, then, a huge shortage of men of the fighting-age generation in Russia. As a result, to this day, World War II is remembered very vividly in Russia, and May 9, Victory Day, is one of its biggest national holidays.

Post-war era

Following World War II, Stalin continued his genocidal policies while exerting ruthless control over the Soviet Union and its satellite states until his death in 1953. More than 15 million Germans were removed from eastern Germany and pushed into central Germany (later called GDR German Democratic Republic) and western Germany (later called FRG Federal Republic of Germany). Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Czech etc. were then moved onto German land. Other ethnic groups, like the Crimean Tartars and Volga Germans, were moved to the Asian part of the Soviet Union. Millions of German POWs and Soviet ex-POWs were sent to the

Gulags. The eastern European states occupied by the Red Army were established as communist Satellite states.

Shortly before he died on March 5, 1953, Stalin accused nine doctors, six of them Jews, of plotting to poison and kill the Soviet leadership. The innocent men were arrested and, at Stalin's personal instruction, tortured to obtain confessions. Stalin died days before their trial was to begin

Policies and accomplishments

Stalin is often credited with successfully industrializing the Soviet Union. What can be said without controversy is that by the time of World War II, the Soviet economy had been industrialized to the point that the Soviets could resist the German invasion. That Stalin or his policies are to be credited for this is contended.

Stalin is also generally credited with destroying the concept of communal socialism (communism) and with "stealing the revolution" (although Lenin started this work).

Stalin, who grew increasingly paranoid in his later years, died on March 5, 1953, at age 74, after suffering a stroke. His body was embalmed and preserved in Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square until 1961, when it was removed and buried near the Kremlin walls as part of the de-Stalinization process initiated by Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971).

By some estimates, he was responsible for the deaths of 20 million people during his brutal rule.

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