

Stalin Vol I

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Stalin

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PART 1

DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE

In all his stature he towers over Europe and Asia, over the past and the future. This is the most famous and at the same time the most unknown person in the world.

Henri Barbusse, *Stalin* (1935)

RUSSIA'S DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE NESTED across a greater expanse than that of any other state, before or since. The realm came to encompass not just the palaces of St. Petersburg and the golden domes of Moscow, but Polish and Yiddish-speaking Wilno and Warsaw, the German-founded Baltic ports of Riga and Reval, the Persian and Turkic-language oases of Bukhara and Samarkand (site of Tamerlane's tomb), and the Ainu people of Sakhalin Island near the Pacific Ocean. "Russia" encompassed the cataracts and Cossack settlements of wildly fertile Ukraine and the swamps and trappers of Siberia. It acquired borders on the Arctic and Danube, the Mongolian plateau, and Germany. The Caucasus barrier, too, was breached and folded in, bringing Russia onto the Black and Caspian seas, and giving it borders with Iran and the Ottoman empire. Imperial Russia came to resemble a religious kaleidoscope with a plenitude of Orthodox churches, mosques, synagogues, Old Believer prayer houses, Catholic cathedrals, Armenian Apostolic churches, Buddhist temples, and shaman totems. The empire's vast territory served as a merchant's paradise, epitomized by the slave markets on the steppes and, later, the crossroad fairs in the Volga valley. Whereas the Ottoman empire stretched over parts of three continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa), some observers in the early twentieth century imagined that the two-continent Russian imperium was neither Europe nor Asia but a third entity unto itself: Eurasia. Be that as it may, what the Venetian ambassador to the Sublime Porte (Agosto Nani) had once said of the Ottoman realm—"more a world than a state"—applied no less to Russia. Upon that world, Stalin's rule would visit immense upheaval, hope, and grief.

Stalin's origins, in the Caucasus market and artisan town of Gori, were exceedingly modest—his father was a cobbler, his mother, a washerwoman and seamstress—but in 1894 he entered an Eastern Orthodox theological seminary in Tiflis, the grandest city of the Caucasus, where he studied to become a priest. If in that same year a subject of the Russian empire had fallen asleep and awoken thirty years later, he or she would have been confronted by multiple shocks. By 1924 something called a telephone enabled near instantaneous communication over vast distances. Vehicles moved without horses. Humans flew in the sky. X-rays could see inside people. A new physics had dreamed up invisible

electrons inside atoms, as well as the atom's disintegration in radioactivity, and one theory stipulated that space and time were interrelated and curved. Women, some of whom were scientists, flaunted newfangled haircuts and clothes, called fashions. Novels read like streams of dreamlike consciousness, and many celebrated paintings depicted only shapes and colors.¹ As a result of what was called the Great War (1914-18), the almighty German kaiser had been deposed and Russia's two big neighboring nemeses, the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, had disappeared. Russia itself was mostly intact, but it was ruled by a person of notably humble origins who also hailed from the imperial borderlands.² To our imaginary thirty-year Rip Van Winkle in 1924, this circumstance—a plebeian and a Georgian having assumed the mantle of the tsars—could well have been the greatest shock of all.

Stalin's ascension to the top from an imperial periphery was uncommon but not unique. Napoleone di Buonaparte had been born the second of eight children in 1769 on Corsica, a Mediterranean island annexed only the year before by France; that annexation (from the Republic of Genoa) allowed this young man of modest privilege to attend French military schools. Napoleon (in the French spelling) never lost his Corsican accent, yet he rose to become not only a French general but, by age thirty-five, hereditary emperor of France. The plebeian Adolf Hitler was born entirely outside the country he would dominate: he hailed from the Habsburg borderlands, which had been left out of the 1871 German unification. In 1913, at age twenty-four, he relocated from Austria-Hungary to Munich, just in time, it turned out, to enlist in the imperial German army for the Great War. In 1923, Hitler was convicted of high treason for what came to be known as the Munich Beer Hall Putsch, but a German nationalist judge, ignoring the applicable law, refrained from deporting the non-German citizen. Two years later, Hitler surrendered his Austrian citizenship and became stateless. Only in 1932 did he acquire German citizenship, when he was naturalized on a pretext (nominally, appointed as a "land surveyor" in Braunschweig, a Nazi party electoral stronghold). The next year Hitler was named chancellor of Germany, on his way to becoming dictator. By the standards of a Hitler or a Napoleon, Stalin grew up as an unambiguous subject of his empire, Russia, which had annexed most of Georgia fully seventy-seven years before his birth. Still, his leap from the lowly periphery was improbable.

Stalin's dictatorial regime presents daunting challenges of explanation. His power of life and death over every single person across eleven time zones—more than 200 million people at prewar peak—far exceeded anything wielded by tsarist Russia's greatest autocrats. Such power cannot be discovered in the biography of the young Soso Jughashvili. Stalin's dictatorship, as we shall see, was a product of immense structural forces: the evolution of Russia's autocratic political system; the Russian empire's conquest of the Caucasus; the tsarist regime's recourse to a secret police and entanglement in terrorism; the European castle-in-the-air project of socialism; the underground conspiratorial nature of Bolshevism (a mirror image of repressive tsarism); the failure of the Russian extreme right to coalesce into a fascism despite all the ingredients; global great-power rivalries, and a shattering world war. Without all of this, Stalin could never have gotten anywhere near power. Added to these large-scale structural factors were contingencies such as the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II during wartime, the conniving miscalculations of Alexander Kerensky (the last

head of the Provisional Government that replaced the tsar in 1917), the actions and especially inactions of Bolshevism's many competitors on the left, Lenin's many strokes and his early death in January 1924, and the vanity and ineptitude of Stalin's Bolshevik rivals.

Consider further that the young Jughashvili could have died from smallpox, as did so many of his neighbors, or been carried off by the other fatal diseases that were endemic in the slums of Batum and Baku, where he agitated for socialist revolution. Competent police work could have had him sentenced to forced labor (katorga) in a silver mine, where many a revolutionary met an early death. Jughashvili could have been hanged by the authorities in 1906-7 as part of the extrajudicial executions in the crackdown following the 1905 revolution (more than 1,100 were hanged in 1905-6).³ Alternatively, Jughashvili could have been murdered by the innumerable comrades he cuckolded. If Stalin had died in childhood or youth, that would not have stopped a world war, revolution, chaos, and likely some form of authoritarianism redux in post-Romanov Russia. And yet the determination of this young man of humble origins to make something of himself, his cunning, his honing of organizational talents would help transform the entire structural landscape of the early Bolshevik revolution from 1917. Stalin brutally, artfully, indefatigably built a personal dictatorship within the Bolshevik dictatorship. Then he launched and saw through a bloody socialist remaking of the entire former empire, presided over a victory in the greatest war in human history, and took the Soviet Union to the epicenter of global affairs. More than for any other historical figure, even Gandhi or Churchill, a biography of Stalin, as we shall see, eventually comes to approximate a history of the world.

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WORLD HISTORY IS DRIVEN BY GEOPOLITICS. Among the great powers, the British empire, more than any other state, shaped the world in modern times. Between 1688 and 1815, the French fought the British for global supremacy. Despite France's greater land mass and population, Britain emerged the winner, mostly thanks to a superior, lean, fiscal-military state.⁴ By the final defeat of Napoleon, which was achieved in a coalition, the British were the world's dominant power. Their ascendancy, moreover, coincided with China's decline under the Qing dynasty, rendering British power-political, military, industrial, cultural, and fiscal-genuinely global. The felicitous phrase "the sun never sets" that was used to describe the extent of the empire's holdings originated in connection with the earlier empire of Spain, but the saying was applied, and stuck, to the British. In the 1870s, however, two ruptures occurred in the British-dominated world: Prince Otto von Bismarck's unification of Germany, realized on the battlefield by Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, which, in lightning fashion, led to the appearance of a surpassing new power on the European continent; and the Meiji restoration in Japan, which imparted tremendous drive to a new power in East Asia. All of a sudden, imperial Russia faced the world's most dynamic new power on its restive western border, and Asia's most dynamic on its underpopulated eastern border. Russia had entered a new world. This was the world into which Stalin was born.

Even the package of attributes that we call modernity was a result not of some inherent sociological process, a move out of tradition, but of a vicious geopolitical competition in

which a state had to match the other great powers in modern steel production, modern militaries, and a modern, mass-based political system, or be crushed and potentially colonized.⁵ These were challenges that confronted conservative establishments especially. Everyone knows that Karl Marx, the radical German journalist and philosopher, loomed over imperial Russia like over no other place. But for most of Stalin's lifetime, it was another German—and a conservative—who loomed over the Russian empire: Otto von Bismarck. A country squire from a Protestant Junker family in eastern Brandenburg who had attended the University of Göttingen, joined a Burschenschaft (fraternity), and was known as a solid drinker and devotee of the female of the species, Bismarck had held no administrative posts as late as 1862, although he had been ambassador to Russia and to France. But in fewer than ten years, he had risen to become the Iron Chancellor and, using Prussia as his base, forged a mighty new country. Prussia, the proverbial "army in search of a nation," had found one. At the same time, the rightist German chancellor showed rulers everywhere how to uphold modern state power by cultivating a broader political base, developing heavy industry, introducing social welfare, and juggling alliances with and against an array of other ambitious great powers.

Bismarck the statesman was one for the ages. He craftily upended his legions of opponents, both outside and inside the German principalities, and instigated three swift, decisive, yet limited wars to crush Denmark, then Austria, then France, but he kept the state of Austria-Hungary on the Danube for the sake of the balance of power. He created pretexts to attack when in a commanding position or baited the other countries into launching the wars after he had isolated them diplomatically. He made sure to have alternatives, and played these alternatives off against each other. That said, Bismarck had had no master plan for German unity—his enterprise was an improvisation, driven partly by domestic political considerations (to tame the liberals in Prussia's parliament). But he had constantly worked circumstances and luck to supreme advantage, breaking through structural limitations, creating new realities on the ground. "Politics is less a science than an art," Bismarck would say. "It is not a subject that can be taught. One must have the talent for it. Even the best advice is of no avail if improperly carried out."⁶ He further spoke of politics in terms of cards, dice, and other games of chance. "One can be as shrewd as the shrewdest in this world and still at any moment go like a child into the dark," Bismarck had remarked on the victory in the war he instigated in 1864 against Denmark.⁷ This he complained was "a thankless job. . . . One has to reckon with a series of probabilities and improbabilities and base one's plans upon this reckoning." Bismarck did not invoke virtue, but only power and interests. Later this style of rule would become known as *realpolitik*, a term coined by August von Rochau (1810–73), a German National Liberal disappointed in the failure to break through to a constitution in 1848. In its origins, *realpolitik* signified effective practical politics to realize idealistic aims. Bismarck's style was more akin to the term *raison d'état*: calculating, amoral reason of state. Instead of principles, there were objectives; instead of morality, means.⁸ Bismarck was widely hated until he proved brilliantly successful, then lionized beyond reason for having smashed France, made a vassal out of Austria, and united Germany.

Bismarck went on to form the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy (1882) and sign a secret "reinsurance treaty" with Russia (1888), extracting neutrality in the event of a

conflict, thereby obviating a possible two-front war against France and Russia and accentuating the new Germany's mastery of the continent. His gifts were those of the inner sanctum. He did not possess a strong voice or self-confidence in speaking, and did not spend much time amid the public. Moreover, he was not the ruler: he served at the pleasure of the king (and then kaiser), Wilhelm I. In that all-important relationship, Bismarck showed psychological skill and tenacity, ceaselessly, efficaciously manipulating Wilhelm I, threatening his resignation, pulling all manner of histrionics. Wilhelm I, for his part, proved to be a diligent, considerate, and intelligent monarch, with the smarts to defer to Bismarck on policy and to attend to the myriad feathers his Iron Chancellor ruffled.⁹ Bismarck strategized to make himself indispensable partly by making everything as complex as possible, so that he alone knew how things worked (this became known as his combinations). He had so many balls up in the air at all times that he could never stop scrambling to prevent any from dropping, even as he was tossing up still more. It must also be kept in mind that Bismarck enjoyed the benefit of the world's then-best land army (and perhaps second-best navy).

Other would-be statesmen across Europe went to school with Bismarck's example of "politics as art."¹⁰ To be sure, from the perspective of London, which had well-established rule of law, Bismarck appeared as a menace. But from the perspective of St. Petersburg, where the challenges were finding a bulwark against leftist extremism, he looked like salvation. From any vantage point, ...

Other Books

Leninism, Translated from the Russian in 1928, this and the second volume of the same title give an invaluable picture of what the Russian leader Joseph Stalin understood by Leninism. Building on the pamphlet Foundations of Leninism, (which forms the first part of this book) the work presents a unified and complete work on the problems of Leninism and socialist construction as they were manifested in the 1920s, as well as discussion of the October Revolution and the relationship of the USSR and the West in the years following the First World War.

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