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TO



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STALIN

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CLAIRE TOMALIN

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW IN
ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Claire Shaw

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Why are we still talking about Stalin?

We all know Stalin; or at least we think we do. The Georgian student priest who grew up to be one of the twentieth century's most notorious mass-murderers is the subject of countless books and documentaries, his plans and policies appearing on the curriculum of thousands of school pupils. Since his death in 1953, historians have picked over his biography and rehashed the major features of his leadership, tracing his radicalisation, his growing paranoia and his murderous intentions, all concealed by the glorious façade of his personality cult.

Look a little closer, however, and the easy narrative collapses. Like the country he led, Stalin can be seen, to borrow Churchill's phrase, as a 'riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma'. This is partly to do with the enormity of the crimes he committed, which tends to preclude easy analysis. As Sheila Fitzpatrick, one of the most prolific and influential historians of the Stalin era, has pointed out, "Absolute evil" is not a useful concept, at least from point of view of a biographer'. Stalin the man is entwined in a complicated fashion with Stalinism, the political system that developed under his rule, which is either a perversion of the socialist experiment or the worst excesses of it, depending on one's point of view. Very few political regimes have been personalised in such a way (Nazism does

not bear the name of Hitler, for example). As a result, it is difficult to disentangle the results of his policies from their intentions, or to consider Stalin's political career with an objective eye. Some troubling questions remain: What visions underpinned his actions? What policies and practices enabled him to rule for so long? Why did nobody stop him?

Sources for untangling these questions are many. Whilst Stalin left no memoirs or diaries – unlike some of his fellow dictators – his articles and theoretical works give a good sense of his developing ideology and the trends of his political thinking. Contemporary accounts by Stalin's friends and colleagues have lent colour and personality to more recent biographies, most notably the two volumes by Simon Sebag-Montefiore. Since the collapse of the USSR and the opening of the archives, it has been possible to trace Stalin's involvement in the workings of government: these sources have recently been used to great effect in biographies by Oleg Khlevniuk and Stephen Kotkin. While there is much more material to be mined, most historians do not anticipate any sensational new revelations about Stalin's life. Yet biographies of Stalin continue to be written and hotly debated, fictionalised accounts of the period continue to appear, and the news cycle continues to react instantly to stories of the dictator.

Why do we continue to care about Stalin? For one thing, Stalin's political career encompassed

one of the most turbulent periods in modern history. Within his lifetime, Russia and her neighbours endured a series of violent revolutions, two world wars, the forced collectivisation of agriculture, a major industrialisation drive, and the violent cataclysms of the Purges, when millions were executed or imprisoned as ‘enemies of the people’. A vast social experiment was launched to radically remake the nature of human society on the basis of equality and the redistribution of wealth; its implementation resulted in a violent and coercive regime that had little respect for human life or the natural world. Stalin did not create this political vision; he walked in the footsteps of other leaders and thinkers, such as Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, who fundamentally shaped his worldview. His interpretation of Marxist thought was radically different from his Bolshevik predecessors, however, setting the USSR on a new and complicated path. Stalin thus needs to be understood as both an architect and a product of Soviet socialism.

Stalin’s rule was eventful, but this is not the only reason the history of his leadership continues to hold sway. His is also a personal history, and a history of personality. Stalin’s role as *vozhd* (leader) cannot be understood without considering his charisma, his ability to persuade and his hold over those around him. At the same time, biographies continue to grapple with the question of Stalin’s ill-health, his paranoia, his wife’s suicide, and the

extent to which these factors influenced his policies. The monstrous nature of his actions later in life, and the way in which he promoted his own glorious public persona, are infinitely fascinating; like watching a horror film, we find it hard to look but cannot look away. Unlike many of those writing during the Soviet era, however, we do so from a position of relative security and freedom. We were not touched by his regime, and thus we can debate his excesses in safety.

For this reason, however, unpicking the issues of his leadership is vitally important. As much as Stalin’s ‘evil’ is repellent, the seductiveness of his ideas still remains apparent, in Russia and elsewhere. The system he built still influences policy in North Korea and Communist China. Historians now seek to explain the excesses of his leadership, not simply as an accident of personality, but also as the product of a particular historical context. Such is the nature, they argue, of great ideological visions, particularly in the context of major social upheavals. Stalin’s actions were undeniably horrific but they are significant, not because he was a monster, but because he was human. As Robert Service asserts:

Stalin carried out campaigns of carnage which have been described with words outside the lexicon of our species: monstrous, fiendish, reptilian; but the lesson to be learned from studying several of the twentieth century’s most

murderous politicians is that it is wrong to depict them as being wholly incomparable to ourselves. Not only wrong; it is also dangerous. If the likes of Stalin, Hitler, Mao Tse-tung and Pol Pot are represented as having been ‘animals’, ‘monsters’ and ‘killing machines’, we shall never be able to discern their successors.

How did Dzhugashvili become Stalin?

Historians have made much of Stalin’s transition from Soso Dzhugashvili, the angel-faced Georgian seminary student, to Stalin, the murderous dictator. Yet sources regarding his early life are thin, and memoirs have not been able to escape the shadow of hindsight regarding his later role as revolutionary and totalitarian *vozhd*. Certainly, as Oleg Khlevniuk has shown, most biographers of Stalin have focused on tales of “the childhood and youth of a future dictator, not the early years of Ioseb Jughashvili”. His early life contains plenty of potential explanations for his bloody political career: his problematic family, his supposed Caucasian propensity to violence, and his political radicalisation. All are plausible, yet none is entirely satisfactory.

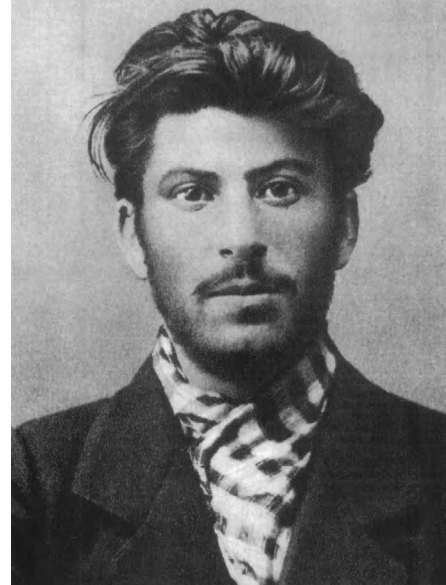
Iosef Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili was born in the Georgian town of Gori, in the outskirts of the

Russian Empire, on 6th December 1878 (in the 1920s, he would officially change the year to 1879). His early family life was far from stable. His mother, Ekaterina (Keke) was the daughter of serfs; his father, Vissarion, was a cobbler. Iosef (known to the family as Soso) was their third child, their first two children having died in infancy. He was a delicate child who was frequently ill. At the age of seven, he contracted smallpox, which scarred his face and earned him the nickname ‘Pockmarked’. As a schoolchild, he was struck in the street on two separate occasions by a phaeton; as a result of these unlucky accidents he was left with a limp and a permanently damaged left arm. Such misfortunes were compounded by his family situation. Vissarion’s drinking habit, which developed in his son’s infancy, caused him to lose the shoemaking business; both parents would regularly beat the young boy. Vissarion also spread rumours of Keke’s infidelity and his son’s illegitimacy: in later years, the rumoured candidates for Stalin’s father would include a merchant, a priest, and even Tsar Alexander III himself.

While it is tempting to read this tale of deprivation and violence as, in the words of Isaac Deutscher, the root of Stalin’s ‘distrust, alertness, evasion, dissimulation and endurance’, the situation was rather more complex. As Stephen Kotkin has argued, the trope of the traumatic childhood ‘is too pat, even for those *with* traumatic childhoods’. Unusually for the time, both Dzhugashvili’s parents

were literate. For Keke, in particular, education offered a path of upward mobility for her son, and she used every influence in Gori society to gain Dzhugashvili a spot at the local Theological School. The young man was a keen scholar, excelling in religious knowledge, languages (including Russian and Church Slavonic) and geography. He sang beautifully and read the liturgy well, and was awarded a mark of 'excellent' for behaviour. There was an unfortunate incident in 1890, when Vissarion, who had by this time abandoned the family home, removed the young Stalin from school and enrolled him as an apprentice cobbler in Tiflis (now Tbilisi). Thanks to Keke's influence in the Georgian Orthodox Church, her son was quickly returned to his studies, graduating successfully in 1894. So far, so ordinary.

Those looking to Stalin's childhood for answers have also focused on his country of birth as a possible explanation for his later behaviour. His contemporaries (and victims) certainly thought his Georgian identity significant. Lev Trotsky, in his damning condemnation of Stalin, made it clear that his place of birth was an important clue to the man he would become: he began his account of Stalin's life by speaking of the 'blending of grit, shrewdness, craftiness and cruelty which has been considered characteristic of the statesmen of Asia'. Nikolai Bukharin referred to him bitterly as 'Genghis Khan', a reference to the brutal Mongol leader who exercised control over Russia during



Stalin aged 23

the 13th century, calling up age-old notions of violence, ruthlessness and the essential 'foreignness' of Central Asia and the Caucasus to Russians.

For many historians, too, the notion of Georgia as part of the Russian 'borderlands', a contested space subject to oppression and domination by Russia, has been seen to explain Stalin's ruthless, elemental character. As Khlevniuk points out, however, the Russian Empire at the turn of the century was 'one vast borderland: between Asia and Europe, between the promises of modernization and the deteriorating traditional ways of life, between the city and the country, between authoritarianism and democratic strivings, between the obscurantism of the regime and the bloodthirsti-

ness of many revolutionaries'. In this light, it is difficult to lay all Stalin's crimes at Georgia's door. Rather more plausibly, Stalin's passionate conversion to Marxism is seen by Simon Sebag-Montefiore as deeply influenced by his identity as Georgian; Marx's tales of the oppression of the proletariat struck a chord with those who experienced the oppression of minority nationalities under the Russian empire's strict policies of Russification (the use of Russian language and traditions in all public institutions).

Identifying the roots of Stalin's character in his family life and national identity relies on a certain amount of supposition. Real evidence of his developing rebellion came from his secondary education and exposure to Marxism. If Stalin displayed little inclination to rebel in Gori, let



DODGING THE SECRET POLICE

Like all Russian revolutionary activists, Stalin spent the early 1900s in a protracted game of cat-and-mouse with the Okhrana, the tsarist Secret Police. Revolutionary activity – indeed, all political opposition

– was strictly illegal under the tsarist regime, and the Okhrana worked to uncover plots against the Tsar, opening letters, tailing individuals, infiltrating organisations and keeping meticulous files on conspirators. For those they caught, the punishments varied, but most often took the form of administrative exile to Siberia. One notable exception was Lenin's older brother, Aleksandr Ulianov, whose execution for planning to

alone revolutionary activity, the picture began to change when he enrolled in the Tiflis Theological Seminary. Stalin had won a scholarship to the seminary, including free room and board, on the basis of his academic achievements. In his first year, he continued to achieve outstanding marks. Yet the strict and repressive policies of the seminary, which included surveillance, frequent searches and violent punishment, pushed the young seminarian towards revolt. This was not unusual; in fact, the seminary had briefly closed in the year before Stalin's enrolment, after the students went on strike and demanded the end to arbitrary abuses of power by some of the teachers. In 1931, he would recall that 'in protest against the outrageous regime and the Jesuitical methods prevalent at the seminary, I was ready to become, and actually did become, a

assassinate Tsar Alexander III was a key moment in Lenin's own radicalisation.

Stalin was first arrested in Batumi, following his masterminding of workers' disturbances there in 1902; he was imprisoned for 18 months before being exiled to Siberia. After a year, he managed to slip past the Okhrana and travel back to Tiflis. As Simon Sebag-Montefiore has traced, Stalin became notorious for these escapes, racking up nine arrests,

four detentions and eight escapes in his underground career. Such escapes were not particularly hard to pull off, with a little planning and inventiveness: Siberian exiles were not physically imprisoned; it was believed that their distance from civilization was enough to protect ordinary Russian citizens from their influence. It appears that Stalin had a particular flair for these escapes, however. Sebag-Montefiore recounts how,

revolutionary'. He began secretly to borrow books from the city library, avidly reading Victor Hugo, Charles Darwin and Marx, learning of the romance of revolution, the death of God, and the leading role of the proletariat. He assumed leadership of an illegal reading group, his grades began to drop, and he was frequently punished for violating the rules.

Marxism clearly had a powerful attraction for the young would-be-revolutionary. As he later put it, his reading led him to the belief that 'the revolutionary proletariat alone is destined by history to liberate mankind and bring the world happiness'. This was far from unusual at this moment in history; Marxism was extraordinarily popular in the Russian Empire in the late 19th century, driven by the social and political upheavals of the country's rapid industrialisation process.

during Stalin's escape from Siberia, he told a local policeman that he was a member of the Okhrana and persuaded him to arrest the real police agent that was on his tail.

This flair for escapology persuaded some contemporaries that Stalin himself served as a double agent for the Okhrana. Accusations emerged after his escape from exile in 1909, as those in the underground sought scapegoats for the

frequent arrests of their comrades. Following the revolution, Stalin's enemies perpetuated these rumours and even forged documents to prove his guilt. There is little evidence to support this theory, however, and most historians conclude that he spent more time in prison than one might expect if he had been working for the other side. Even Trotsky, in his biography of Stalin, concluded that 'it is unlikely that the accusers had definite proofs'. ■

The 'total' worldview put forward by Marxism, with its faith in the inexorable progress of human history and the coming of socialism, was not that distant from the certainties of Orthodox Christianity; certainly, Stalin found his skills at reading the liturgy transferred easily to political meetings. His radicalism soon outgrew the seminary grounds. His desire to involve himself in 'real' politics led him to join a local branch of the Social Democratic Workers' Party, an underground network of organisations that had been formally founded in Minsk in 1898. Stalin's official biography describes his involvement with a local organisation of railway workers, for whom he acted as an unofficial propagandist and organiser. In 1899, when he was expelled from the seminary, his path as a Marxist revolutionary was already established.

These three strands – family, nationality and political ideology – play out in Stalin's experimentation with his name. It was during his time at the Tiflis Seminary that Soso, the diminutive form of Iosef, began to give way to more romantic pseudonyms. As a young seminarian, he published several poems with a local newspaper under the name Soselo. As his radicalism increased, he began to ask his comrades to call him Koba, the name of the hero of Georgian writer Alexander Kazbegi's novel *The Patricide*; his closest confidantes would continue to use that name throughout his life. The revolutionary movement was built on such pseudonyms, which had the practical purpose of