

STALIN: THE MAN AND THE LEADER

AMONG the great actors on the stage of World War Two, Churchill alone is still alive. He has proved himself, aristocrat that he is, the hardiest of them all. Roosevelt, perhaps the most sensitive of them and moreover weighted down by his energy-consuming physical handicap, was the first to go. Then came Hitler, squashed out of sight, if not out of life, by defeat. And now Stalin. His comparatively early death should seem surprising. This robust old peasant type, apparently unruffled by anything that came his way—and what a lot had come his way!—seemed indestructible. The persistent rumours of his approaching end, current since 1949, seemed to be wishful thinking of a world incapable of solving problems without some “act of God” rather than accurate information about Stalin’s failing health.

I am afraid that we shall never know a great deal about Stalin’s private life. What we have been told is mostly conjecture, rumour and scandal. Stalin might of course have said with Bismarck: “If I had no private life, it was because I was consumed in the service of the fatherland.” The trouble is that such a man, obsessed with the State and identifying himself with the State, is apt to become a dictator. Was Stalin a dictator in this sense? Was he so successfully identifying himself with the State that every word from him could bring all the resources of the country, both material and spiritual, into motion? I am inclined to believe that it was so. But the people—and that includes ourselves—like their dictator, if there must be one, to be a lusty exhibitionist. The archetype of a popular conception of dictator in recent times was Mussolini: swashbuckling, full-blooded, enjoying every opportunity for showing off and dressing up. Certainly Stalin was not that kind of dictator. Was he perhaps an oriental despot? Although he has been likened to one, I feel that this awkward little man, with the shrewd eyes, his embarrassed smile, his pipe and moustache, his simple peasant-like dress, only lately exchanged for the ill-fitting peaked cap and uniform of a marshal of the Soviet Union, does not fulfil our idea of a great Khan either.

It is dangerous to generalise, but the Russian mujik thought of the Tsar as the little father, and many of the sons and grandsons of these mujiks have transferred this picture to the Soviet ruler. For many millions—and that includes even a number of men in concentration and labour camps and in prisons—Stalin was the homely little wise old father sitting in his Kremlin planning the welfare of his people but foiled in his pious wishes by wicked officials. It is impossible to accept the story told by Communist emigres, that all the people in Soviet Russia hated and loathed Stalin. The adulation of his person in newspapers, schoolbooks, on calendars, in poems (where he is called Father, Sun, Creator, Saviour) is not always the cynical kowtowing before a dreadful scourge. Of course there were many who hated him, many more who were indifferent to him, but it was comparatively easy to brand those as traitors and lukewarm supporters.

Stalin was fond of telling the Antaeus legend. Antaeus in ancient Greek legend

was a giant whom Hercules had to kill. Hercules nearly strangled him, holding him up in the air, but when he dropped him on the ground Antaeus was always revived and gained new strength from the contact with his mother earth. Overlooking that Hercules in the end *did* kill Antaeus, Stalin argued: Antaeus is the Communist Party, the earth is the Russian or Soviet people; as long as the Party draws its strength from the people it is invincible. He believed that the Communist Party must lead the people, but also that the people must support the Party.

Stalin had been a pupil in a seminary for budding orthodox priests. After that he had become a revolutionary and received no further schooling. Yet his aversion to intellectuals (very often Jews, but Stalin was not an anti-semiter; his last wife was a Jewess) is strange. For in a way he himself was an intellectual. His collected works published during his lifetime amounted to 13 volumes, much of which was on the “intellectual subject” of Marxism and Leninism. His hatred of intellectuals was I think both the result of practical experience and instinctive dislike. He felt that he was one of the people and was really at ease only in their company. He shared their mixed distrust and respect for the “educated.” Stalin found that very often his own remarkable and practical intelligence was capable of doing better than the experts. This attitude explains his meddling in almost every branch of learning or art, strategy, philosophy, linguistics, music, literature.

Although Stalin was a native of Georgia, he loved Russia, the Russian language and even the Russian Empire. From his schoolboy days he had been convinced that the Russian Empire must remain. He conceived of a large centralised State, and Georgian nationalism was repellent to him. His early study on the problem of nationalities, which later earned him the commissariat for nationalities, showed that even here he was opposed to the intellectuals, who in their revolutionary plans had ignored nationalism almost completely and dismissed it as “an animal reaction” which would disappear with the revolution. He was not blind to the strength of national feeling among the different nationalities of the Russian Empire or later Soviet Russia, and was determined to let them have “autonomy” at first, as long as that would not endanger the unity of the Russian State.

It is a trite commonplace to say that Stalin was an extraordinary man. But after the revolution there were in Russia dozens of extraordinary men. Why did Stalin ultimately become leader of the Soviet Union after Lenin’s death? Outside Russia he was practically unknown at the time of Lenin’s death in 1924, and even inside the Soviet Union nobody would have guessed that Stalin would become Lenin’s successor. The technical reason for his rise in the party was his quick realisation of the chances his position as secretary general of the central committee of the Communist Party offered him. With patience and untiring persistence he built up a centralised



organisation of the party, with the result that the party officials all over the Soviet Union were bound to him as their immediate boss by a quite natural loyalty. The intellectuals simply were not in the running. They had all groped for positions as commissars or diplomats and even the most brilliant among the intellectuals, Trotsky, was no match for Stalin’s administrative genius.

Self-assurance, courage, organising ability, a kind of slow pedestrian plodding, self-restraint when necessary, patience, were qualities Stalin possessed and all the others lacked to some extent. Certainly Stalin was also shrewd, cunning, brutal, and did not hesitate to shed blood without any scruples whatsoever; but those less pleasant characteristics were supplementary rather than dominant in his achievement. If Russia today is a bureaucratic machine of quite considerable qualities, Stalin is in the first place responsible.

The work that was done under the Stalin administration, which lasted just about a quarter of a century, is quite impressive. The independent farmer was destroyed and collective farms established, with a terrific loss in material and human life. Entirely new large industrial towns were built in the Urals. In 1936 a new Constitution was introduced which may have been intended as an approach to the western powers through its super-

ficially democratic flavour. Huge treason trials of prominent Communists led in their wake to the establishment of labour camps with perhaps between five to 10 per cent. of the population as inmates. The entire department of internal affairs was organised as a huge secret police state with its own crack army of about 500,000 men, its own factories and labour corps to defend the regime and punish potential traitors; and the Communist Party, linked in some curious way to the civil service, was reorganised several times after extensive purges of undesirable.

After the victory over Germany in 1945, Stalin seems to have over-estimated his strength, and especially the willingness of western leaders to let him have his way. He never doubted, of course, that the two “camps” of communism and capitalism could not live side by side for ever and he was equally certain that communism would win in the end. He may have taken this conviction with him to the grave. Looking at his life as a closed episode, one must admit that it was a life worth living, at least for him, and as successful as he could possibly have wished. But one must also say that only a person completely indifferent to the suffering of his fellow men could have lived such a life; and it is certain that only a few people would call a life built on such foundations successful.

—J.F.K.