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# Stalin: A Brutal Legacy Uncovered

By Mike Kubric  
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*Mike Kubric is a former correspondent of Newsweek magazine. In 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev delivered a speech that uncovered shocking revelations of the late General Secretary and Premier Joseph Stalin. The following text discusses these atrocities and provides insight into how Joseph Stalin, an overall unappealing figure, managed to create a larger-than-life persona through ambition and fear. As you read, take notes on how the author characterizes Stalin and how this characterization affected his actions.*

## The Rise of Stalin

[1] Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, one of history's greatest tyrants,<sup>1</sup> died in March 1953. He had ruled over the 140 million people of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) for almost 30 years, and he passed away at night, alone, in his dacha—country house—without a last word to be recorded for posterity.

His obituary, delivered three years later by Nikita Khrushchev,<sup>2</sup> one of Stalin's closest collaborators and most fervent<sup>3</sup> lackeys,<sup>4</sup> had the spellbound audience of almost 2,000 delegates to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. The oration,<sup>5</sup> officially titled "On the Cult of Personality<sup>6</sup> and Its Consequences," lasted from midnight to 4 a.m., and included 61 specific charges of Stalin's atrocities<sup>7</sup> and blunders.



*"Stalin" by Isaak Brodsky is in the public domain.*

1. **Tyrant (noun):** a cruel and oppressive ruler
2. Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev (1894-1971) served as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 until 1964 and as Premier of the Soviet Union from 1958 to 1964. He was responsible for the de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union and a number of other reforms. He was eventually replaced by his colleagues in 1964 with Leonid Brezhnev as First Secretary and Alexei Kosygin as Premier.
3. **Fervent (adjective):** having or displaying a passionate intensity
4. **Lackey (noun):** a servant; one who acts servilely
5. **Oration (noun):** speech
6. A "cult of personality" refers to when media, propaganda, or other methods create an idealized, semi-godlike image, often through flattery and praise. Creating this image helps to preserve a leader's or group's power.
7. **Atrocity (noun):** an extremely wicked or cruel act, typically one involving physical violence or injury

As Khrushchev informed the closed session of the Party apparatchiks,<sup>8</sup> his report—which has entered history as the “Secret Speech”—was based on research by a special commission of senior leaders of the Communist Party. It covered primarily only one part of Stalin’s murderous record: the peak years of his savage “Great Purge” in the mid- and late 1930s, a massacre that wiped out a whole generation of Bolsheviks,<sup>9</sup> the Party’s oldest and most faithful members.

Khrushchev, who went on to become the Soviet prime minister, said next to nothing about the rest of Stalin’s victims, who have been estimated at more than 20 million.<sup>10</sup>

- [5] Stalin’s genocidal<sup>11</sup> record was the product of a ruthless, steely personality hardened by searing hardships in his youth: first, brutal beatings by his alcoholic, dirt-poor father; and later, several rounds of imprisonment and exile—from which he often escaped—following his expulsion from a Russian Orthodox seminary<sup>12</sup> for fomenting<sup>13</sup> a strike of railroad workers. For the 20-year-old Stalin, an outstanding student with top marks in Bible and Church studies, the strike was the first step on a new road—a career of rebellion, crime, and radical politics that eventually made him the unquestioned boss of the Communist Party and of 140 million people in the Soviet Union.

### ***Early Career in the Communist Party***

At the start of the 20th century, during the dying years of the Russian monarchy, Stalin was an unlikely candidate for reaching the top of the greasy pole of the underground Communist party. He was a native of Georgia,<sup>14</sup> one of the 15 republics that later made up the Soviet Union; he spoke Russian with a thick accent; he was notorious for his vulgarity,<sup>15</sup> crude anti-Semitism<sup>16</sup> and rudeness; and his physique was marred by a short build, a pockmarked face, and a crippled left arm.

But what he lacked in polish and good looks, Stalin more than made up for with his remorseless drive, brutality,<sup>17</sup> and ruthless disregard for anyone—including his closest and oldest collaborators—but himself.

Little is known for sure about how Stalin became a member of the Communist Party’s central organ, the Politburo, during the years preceding the February 1917 overthrow of Czar Nicholas II.<sup>18</sup> Historians believe that the young Georgian was organizing bank robberies to finance the Party’s underground work, and his high rank was an award for being jailed or exiled by Okhrana, the czarist security police. ;

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8. **Apparatchik (noun):** a subordinate who is unquestioningly loyal to a powerful political leader or organization
  9. The Bolsheviks were the majority faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) that was also known as the “Reds,” especially during the Russian Civil War. The Bolsheviks were led by future Soviet dictator Vladimir Lenin and became the de facto party of the Soviet Union.
  10. The majority of this count were victims of war, famine, or imprisonment in the Gulag—forced labor camps/prisons and instruments of political suppression.
  11. **Genocidal (adjective):** relating to or involving the deliberate killing of a large group of people of a particular nation or ethnic group
  12. **Seminary (noun):** a college that prepares students to be priests, ministers, or rabbis
  13. **Foment (verb):** to instigate or stir up (an undesirable or violent emotion or course of action)
  14. Joseph Stalin’s birth name was actually Ioseb Besarionis dze Jughashvili. He began using the alias Stalin, meaning “man of steel,” sometime between 1910 and 1912, likely in an attempt to make himself sound more Russian.
  15. **Vulgarity (noun):** the quality of lacking sophistication or good taste; unrefined
  16. Anti-Semitism is a term referring to hostility to or prejudice against Jewish people.
  17. **Brutality (noun):** physical violence; great cruelty
  18. Czar Nicholas II (1868-1918) was the last Emperor of Russia, ruling from 1894 until his abdication of the throne in 1917.

But evidence of these activities is lost. In 1929, five years after Stalin succeeded the Russian leader Vladimir Lenin,<sup>19</sup> he ordered the destruction of all documents about his rise to power. What is better documented are his nearly 30 years of blood-soaked reign as the head of the Communist Party and the Soviet government. Below are his most egregious crimes.

## Stalinism

### *Collectivization and famines*

- [10] In 1928, as part of his first five-year plan—an all-out effort that was supposed to dramatically increase Soviet food and industrial production—Stalin ordered the seizure and collectivization<sup>20</sup> of all agricultural land. The huge farms, called kolchozes and sovchozes,<sup>21</sup> were worked by the now-landless muzhiks,<sup>22</sup> and were made responsible for ridiculously high deliveries of food to feed the workers in the rapidly built factories.

The program, which Edward Crankshaw, a British expert on the Soviet Union, called a “wholesale application of terror to the countryside,” was a total failure. Instead of increasing the food supply, the collective farms produced meager harvests and tried to meet their quotas by reducing the country’s livestock by a half. The resulting famines and shortages lasted for years and starved to death an estimated 6 million to 11 million peasants.

In his memoir *Khrushchev Remembers*, the former Soviet premier quoted drastic reports that he’d received as the First Party Secretary in Ukraine<sup>23</sup> about peasants who were driven to cannibalism. “The Stalin brand of collectivization,” Khrushchev charged, was conducted “with...reckless, bestial<sup>24</sup> fervor<sup>25</sup> (and) brought us nothing but misery and brutality.”

### *Purges*

One of Stalin’s striking characteristics was his fear for his life. A forceful personality and a loud-mouthed bully, he avoided any situation or activity that that was physically dangerous. For example, he never took part in the early demonstrations against the monarchy or visited the front lines during World War II, even though he was the top commander of the Soviet Red Army. ;

As Khrushchev reported in his Secret Speech, the dictator was “sickly suspicious, distrustful” and so scared of being poisoned that he would not touch his food or drink until someone else had tasted it.

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19. Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known by his alias Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), was a Russian communist leader, politician, and political theorist. He served as head of the Communist Party following the abdication of Nicholas II and officially led the Soviet Union from 1922 until 1924. He developed a system of Marxism known as Leninism.
  20. Collectivization is the organization of land and/or homes on the basis of ownership by the people or the state, ending private ownership. In the Soviet Union, this policy was used to force peasants to give up their individual farms, to consolidate their homes, and to work on collective farms.
  21. Kolchozes were collective or commune farms, in which multiple famers worked their holdings as a joint project. Sovchozes were state-owned farms.
  22. Muzhik is a term used to describe a Russian peasant, especially those who are serfs or former serfs.
  23. The Holodomor, or “hunger-extinction,” was a man-made famine in Ukraine in 1932 and 1933 that killed an approximately 2.5–7.5 million Ukrainians. It was part of the wider disaster, the Soviet famine of 1932–33, but as of 2006 this event has been recognized by 25 countries as an act of genocide by the Soviet Union against ethnic Ukrainians.
  24. **Bestial (adjective):** or or like a beast
  25. **Fervor (noun):** intense and passionate feeling

- [15] Stalin, Khrushchev said, saw “enemies,” “two-facers,” and “spies... everywhere and in everything”—an obsession that eventually turned him “against eminent<sup>26</sup> Party workers whom he knew for years.” The upshot was an era of fraudulent<sup>27</sup> trials whose victims were forced to confess to illusory<sup>28</sup> crimes, knowing that they would be executed.

The devious process, which was best described in Arthur Koestler’s classic novel *Darkness at Noon*, was for the first time officially admitted in the Secret Speech:

“Soviet and economic activists who were branded in 1937-1938 as ‘enemies’ were actually never enemies, spies, wreckers,” Khrushchev told the delegates. “They were always honest Communists; they were only so stigmatized<sup>29</sup> and often, no longer able to bear barbaric<sup>30</sup> tortures, they charged themselves with all kinds of grave and unlikely crimes.” ;

By focusing on the two years, Khrushchev told the shocked gathering, the investigating commission found evidence that “over one-and-a-half million individuals were arrested for ‘anti-Soviet activities,’” and “over 680,500 (of them) were executed.”

For example, Khrushchev said, of the 139 veteran Bolsheviks who were promoted in 1937 to the Party’s Central Committee, “98—that is, 70 percent of them—were arrested and shot” by the end of 1938. Lower-ranking apparatchiks, Khrushchev added, were no safer. Of the 1,966 ordinary delegates, he said, “many of (whom) had suffered and fought for the Party’s interests, 1,108 were arrested on charges of anti-revolutionary crimes.”

## ***World War II murders***

- [20] Khrushchev was less explicit<sup>31</sup> about Stalin’s murders just before and during World War II. The first mass executions took place shortly after the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a treaty of “Friendship and Cooperation”<sup>32</sup> in August 1939, and both countries invaded Poland (the Wehrmacht<sup>33</sup> from the west and the Red Army from the east).

Preparing to make “his” half of the occupied country part of the Soviet Union, in May 1940 Stalin ordered NKVD, the Soviet secret police, to identify and “eliminate” Polish “intelligence agents, gendarmes,<sup>34</sup> landowners, saboteurs, factory owners, lawyers, officials, and priests” who might turn out to be difficult citizens.

NKVD checked more than 110,000 Poles and murdered 22,000 of them, including all captured officers of the Polish army. Most of the victims were shot in the back of their head and dropped into a mass grave in Katyn Forest in Russia. Stalin never admitted to or apologized for the amply documented crime.<sup>35</sup>

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26. **Eminent** (*adjective*): famous and respected within a particular sphere or profession

27. **Fraudulent** (*adjective*): obtained, done by, or involving deception, especially criminal deception

28. **Illusory** (*adjective*): not real

29. **Stigmatized** (*adjective*): regarded as worthy of disgrace or great disapproval

30. **Barbaric** (*adjective*): savagely cruel; exceedingly brutal

31. **Explicit** (*adjective*): clearly expressed or stated

32. This is also known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, a neutrality or non-aggression pact between the two that would be broken within two years when Nazi Germany attacked Soviet forces.

33. The Wehrmacht was the armed forces of Nazi Germany from 1935 to 1946.

34. A gendarme is an armed police officer (in France or in other French-speaking countries).

The second wave of murders followed the staggeringly successful June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union—in brazen violation of the 1939 treaty—by the Wehrmacht. Stalin, who had ignored all warning of the impending attack, was at a loss for how to explain series of defeats by the totally unprepared Red Army and Air Force.

His solution was to order a crackdown that started with the arrest of eight top Air Force generals, and continued—during the desperate “Battle of Moscow”<sup>36</sup>—with the execution of at least 300 Red Army high-ranking officers and generals.

- [25] The lack of experienced commanders was later blamed for the slaughter of many of the more than 11 million brave Soviet soldiers who died in the war. They were poorly led, frequently untrained and as late as 1943 were sent to the front unarmed and told to use the weapons of their fallen comrades.<sup>37</sup>

As the supreme commander, Stalin prohibited<sup>38</sup> the Red Army to retreat and frequently ordered the troops to fight hopeless battles against the superbly equipped Wehrmacht. He regarded Soviet POWs<sup>39</sup> as “traitors” and when his own son, Yakov, was captured by the Germans, he refused to trade him for a German general.

Khrushchev, who served in the war as a political commissar,<sup>40</sup> charged in his memoirs that Stalin’s conduct of the war “cost us much blood.”

### ***The Doctors’ Plot***

Stalin’s remorseless pursuit of victory regardless of casualties eventually routed the invaders and made a major contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany in May 1945. But rather than resting on the hard-won laurels, the dictator ended his rule with a scandal that nearly cost more lives.

In January 1953, the official Soviet daily Pravda (meaning “truth”) startled the world by announcing the arrest of 15 top medical doctors—almost all Jews—who were treating Stalin’s atherosclerosis<sup>41</sup> and other ailments. They were accused of trying to poison the ultra-suspicious and openly anti-Semitic Stalin, and he was expected to deal with them in his customary way.

- [30] There were several theories on what saved their lives. One of them, according to Russian historian Zhores Medvedev, a co-author of *The Unknown Stalin*, was a concern that “the execution of prominent physicians inevitably would lead to an unprecedented anti-Semitic campaign and an international outcry (over) the possibility of mass deportation of Jews from Moscow to remote regions of the country.”

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35. The Soviet Union continued to deny this massacre and blame it on the Nazis until 1990. Even so, it wasn’t officially blamed on Stalin and other Soviet officials as having ordered the killing until 2010.

36. The Battle of Moscow refers to two periods of significant fighting on the Eastern Front of World War II between October 1941 and January 1942. The Soviet defenses frustrated Germany’s attack on Moscow, the capital of the USSR.

37. The word “comrade,” while literally means companion, was often used in the Soviet Union as a form of address specifically to a fellow socialist or communist.

38. **Prohibit (verb):** to formally forbid something by law, rule, or other authority

39. “Prisoners of war”

40. A commissar is an official of the Communist Party responsible for political education and organization.

41. Atherosclerosis is a disease of the arteries characterized by plaque of fatty material on their inner walls.

More important in all likelihood was that Stalin died two months later, and there was not enough to prepare the fraudulent trials. The doctors were all exonerated<sup>42</sup> within days after his death.

In a rare surviving letter to her son, Stalin's mother wished him "Victory!" and an "annihilation of all your enemies." But in the end, Stalin was a loser. At first, he was embalmed and placed "for eternity" in a mausoleum alongside Vladimir Lenin, the idolized founder of the Russian Communist Party and the Soviet Union.

Six years later, following the revelation<sup>43</sup> of his bloody deeds, Stalin's body was quietly removed and buried in an obscure place behind the Kremlin<sup>44</sup> walls.

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42. **Exonerated** (*adjective*): cleared of blame

43. **Revelation** (*noun*): a surprising and previously unknown fact; a realization

44. The word "kremlin" itself refers to a citadel within a Russian town. The Kremlin itself is a reference to the most famous kremlin in Moscow, the center of the Russian (and formerly Soviet) government—so much so that the building and the government are interchangeable.

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes the form in which the text is written and the impact this has on the overall passage? [RI.6] [RI.5]
  - A. The article is framed chronologically, immediately beginning with Stalin's early life and following him to his death, and thus the reader can more closely follow the evolution of a tyrant.
  - B. The article is introduced and framed in the context of Khrushchev's Secret Speech; this contributes to the historical context of the piece, emphasizing both the secrecy of the USSR and the impact of these revelations regarding Stalin.
  - C. The article is framed from many different perspectives, namely from the point of view of his numerous victims; this creates a more meaningful and emotional impact on the text.
  - D. The article is framed and introduced in the context of Khrushchev's Secret Speech, and therefore it is impacted by his personal bias against Stalin rather than by fact.
  
2. What connection does the author draw between Stalin's first five-year-plan and the famines of the late 1920s and early 1930s? [RI.3]
  - A. The plan to collectivize was ignored by the Soviet peasants, who continued working their own farms; the failure to reach the demands of the five-year-plan resulted in famine across the country.
  - B. Collectivization meant that the Soviet Union began exporting more supplies, namely food; when it ran out of supplies but could not lower demand, a famine broke out in both the Soviet Union and in countries like the Ukraine.
  - C. The collectivization of agriculture was an overall failure; the collective farms produced meager crops and could not meet their increased demands, thus resulting in famine.
  - D. The collectivization of agriculture meant that the staple crops—such as grain—were ignored in favor of other, more specialized crops in higher demand, resulting in famine.
  
3. PART A: Which of the following best describes the Soviet Union's participation in WWII under Stalin's command? [RI.3]
  - A. The Soviet Union betrayed the Allies by joining the Axis Powers for the majority of the war.
  - B. Stalin's command of the Soviet Union was poor; he ordered countless executions and participation in misguided battles, remorseless of the blood shed for his mistakes.
  - C. Stalin's command of the Soviet Union in WWII proved surprisingly adept, and his ruthlessness in battle was his greatest asset as a commander.
  - D. The Soviet Union under Stalin's command in WWII was, overall, directly useless to the victory of Allies over Nazi Germany and the Axis Powers.

4. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. "The first mass executions took place shortly after the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a treaty of "Friendship and Cooperation" in August 1939, and both countries invaded Poland (the Wehrmacht from the west and the Red Army from the east)." (Paragraph 19)
  - B. "The second wave of murders followed the staggeringly successful June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union—in brazen violation of the 1939 treaty—by the Wehrmacht." (Paragraph 22)
  - C. "His solution was to order a crackdown that started with the arrest of eight top Air Force generals, and continued—during the desperate "Battle of Moscow"—with the execution of at least 300 Red Army high-ranking officers and generals." (Paragraph 23)
  - D. "As the supreme commander, Stalin prohibited the Red Army to retreat and frequently ordered the troops to fight hopeless battles against the superbly equipped Wehrmacht.... Khrushchev, who served in the war as a political commissar, charged in his memoirs that Stalin's conduct of the war "cost us much blood."" (Paragraphs 25-26)
5. PART A: How does the scandal referred to as "The Doctors' Plot" contribute to the author's characterization of Stalin? [RI.6]
- A. The scandal emphasizes how poorly the public actually view Stalin, in contrast with Khrushchev's accusations of a cult of personality.
  - B. The scandal contributes to the characterization of Stalin as anti-Semitic and a continued supporter of the former Nazi Germany.
  - C. The scandal emphasizes Stalin's great fear for his life and paranoia of those closest to him, that he would accuse the people charged with treating him.
  - D. The scandal contributes to the characterization of Stalin as a poor leader; had he not died so soon after, the scandal would have likely been his downfall.
6. PART B: Which of the following passages best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. Paragraph 9
  - B. Paragraph 15
  - C. Paragraph 19
  - D. Paragraph 27
7. What were Khrushchev's likely motivations in delivering his "Secret Speech"? Consider what he covered, what he left out, and what he emphasized in the speech, according to the text. Cite evidence from the text in your answer. [RI.6]

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