

Memoir of a Stalin Biographer

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The old maxim *cherchez la femme* can do duty in my case to explain why someone who never intended to be a biographer became a sort of one, although reluctantly and after long delay. The *femme* was the revisionist of psychoanalytic thought, Karen Horney. I became acquainted with her through her writings, starting around 1940.

When her last and synthesizing book, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, was published in 1950, I was in Moscow, a member of the American Embassy. I ordered a copy from Brentano's in Washington via the diplomatic pouch. I read it repeatedly. Despite its lucidity of expression, it is not an easy work to comprehend and to use. It deeply influenced my thinking.

Horney's subject was the "neurotic character structure." To summarize the core of her argument, a person who experiences "basic anxiety" resulting from adverse emotional circumstances in early life may seek and find a rock of inner security by forming an idealized self-image. Its content will depend upon the direction the child takes in relations with others -- moving against, toward, or away from them. For example, one whose tendency is to move against others may idealize himself as a great warrior, while one whose tendency is to move toward others may imagine himself as saintlike.

Gradually and unconsciously, if the anxiety-causing conditions do not change, the child moves from self-idealizing to adopting the idealized image as his real identity. Then the energies available for growth toward self-realization are invested in the quest to prove the idealized self in action. Horney calls this the "search for glory."

Because the idealized self is absolute -- free of the faults, blemishes, and limitations that go with being human -- it can't be actualized. Hence, the individual begins to feel estranged from, and to accuse, hate, and condemn, the fallible, merely human "empirical self" that he proves to be in practice. The drive to enact the idealized self is, however, compulsive, with extreme pain of anxiety and self-condemnation as the price of failure.

Consequently, the by now inwardly conflicted individual develops a system of unconscious defenses against the experience of failure. These include repression of the disparity between the idealized and empirical selves; various forms of rationalization; the seeking of affirmation of the idealized self by significant others; and the projection upon still others -- who can realistically be condemned and combated -- of both the repressed faults and the self-hatred that they arouse.

Repressed self-hatred is then experienced as hatred of others. The particular others on whom it is projected are likely to be those who have incurred the neurotic person's vindictive animosity by somehow failing to affirm him as the idealized self that he mistakenly takes himself to be. A "need for vindictive triumph" is, therefore, a regular ingredient, according to Horney, of the search for glory, especially in those who have a tendency to move against others in a drive toward mastery.

When I was reading and rereading this book, my work consisted in directing a translation bureau operated cooperatively by the British, American, and Canadian embassies. It produced a daily bulletin of complete or condensed translations into English of articles selected by me from eight Soviet daily papers, and separate translations of articles selected from periodicals ranging from the Central Committee's monthly *Kommunist* to Soviet journals on history, law, philosophy and the arts. Because my Russian wife, Eugenia, whom I had married in 1946, was not given an exit visa to enable her to accompany me back home, I was, so to speak, serving an indefinite sentence in Moscow.

The Cold War was raging fiercely then. It received domestic as well as foreign coverage in the Soviet press. There was even a play running in Moscow theaters entitled *The Mad Haberdasher*, whose thinly disguised villain was a Hitler-like younger Harry Truman; the highly favorable press reviews of it were vintage Cold War material. But if hatred of enemies was one pervasive press theme, love was another: love of Soviet citizens and all people of good will abroad for the Soviet regime as personified by Stalin.

What would one day be called the "cult of personality," with Stalin as the centerpiece, was at its zenith. Unlike Orwell's Big Brother, Stalin really existed. But he was a recluse and hardly ever appeared in public save for the parades in Red Square twice a year, May Day and November 7. Nevertheless, a heroic portrait of him, usually in generalissimo's uniform, appeared almost daily on the front pages of Soviet newspapers, and in a myriad other ways he symbolically figured in Soviet public life as an object of reverential tribute.

Two years earlier, in 1949, the cult of Stalin had reached a climax in the celebration of his 70th birthday. This amounted to what can only be described as his virtual deification. Long in advance, the press and radio prepared for the event with a mass of materials on his greatness as a revolutionary and as a statesman of world-historic stature. Plays were staged about heroic episodes from his early life in Georgia. Reports filled the papers on presents coming in from all over Russia and distant countries, and afterwards a special "Museum of Presents to I. V. Stalin" was created to put these gifts on display.

On the great day itself, December 21, Politburo members and others contributed laudatory articles to *Pravda*, and there was an evening meeting in the Bolshoi Theater to mark the occasion. To keep the memory of all this alive, *Pravda* carried, every day for over a year, under the headline "The Stream of Greetings," long lists in fine print of the names of organizations that had sent birthday congratulations to Comrade Stalin.

One Saturday afternoon in 1951 I had been browsing in the Academy of Sciences bookstore and was walking down Gorky Street toward the U.S. Embassy on Mokhovaya. In full view below

was Red Square and, off to its right, the Kremlin. It may have crossed my mind that Stalin was at work there. Suddenly the thought occurred to me: What if the idealized image of Stalin appearing day by day in the party-controlled, party-supervised Soviet press was *an idealized self in Horney's sense?*

If so, Stalin must be a neurotic personality as portrayed in her book, except that he possessed an unprecedented plenitude of political power. In that case, his personality cult must reflect his own monstrously inflated vision of himself as the greatest genius of Russian and world history. It must be an institutionalization of his neurotic character structure.

So this Kremlin recluse, this ruler who was so reticent about himself, must be spilling out his innermost thoughts about himself in millions of newspapers and journals published in Russia. He must be the most self-revealed disturbed person of all time. To find out what was most important about him there would be no need to get him onto a couch; one could do it by reading *Pravda*, while rereading Horney! I began to do just that, and in the process grew more convinced of my hypothesis.

At that time, the members of the small colony of Westerners living in Moscow attached no serious importance to the adulatory publicity surrounding Stalin. Everyone knew that a personality cult existed and accounted for a big share of material in the Soviet press, and everyone assumed that this press was regime-managed, regime-censored, and regime-controlled, down to the minutiae that were pondered for potential insight into Soviet policy. But these two facts were not seen as meaningfully related, partly because the regime was not understood to be a personal one.

Statesmen who negotiated in Moscow, such as General Marshall in 1947 and a very few others, sensed that Stalin's word was final on foreign political issues, but this was interpreted as signifying that he was the ultimate spokesman of a Politburo consensus, and not necessarily a controlling figure in creating the consensus. Ambassador Walter Bedell Smith, for example, in *My Three Years in Moscow* opined that Stalin should be seen as a chairman of the Politburo board; and in taking this view he was certainly relying upon advice from Embassy officers and Russian specialists in the U.S. government.

What, you may be asking yourself, did we foreigners in Moscow suppose was Stalin's attitude toward his cult? I believe the general view was that he simply tolerated it as a pragmatic political device for providing a father symbol ("father and teacher of the peoples" was a phrase regularly applied to him in cult articles) for a population that historically personalized authoritarian rule in a *tsar batiushka* (father Tsar). Very likely one reason why knowledgeable observers took such a view was that he himself had given the cue for it in an interview with the German writer Lion Feuchtwanger, who duly recorded the comment in his *Moscow 1937*. It appeared from Feuchtwanger's account that an indifferent and even somewhat bemused Stalin felt he had to make a concession to his backward people's persisting need for a ruler cult as a personalization of Russia's present regime.

Not surprisingly, my novel hypothesis found little favor with the few acquaintances in the Anglo-American colony in Moscow to whom I confided it. They dismissed it as improbable, or

they pooh- poohed it with comments like: "Stalin doesn't give a hoot for the cult; he simply countenances it as a useful propaganda tool in Soviet domestic affairs." After a few such exchanges, I gave up propagating my idea -- but I didn't give up the idea.

In the summer of 1952 I flew home for a short leave. While in the United States, I was asked by the State Department to consult with Russian specialists at the Voice of America, which then had headquarters in New York. There I met with Bertram D. Wolfe, who was then growing famous as the author of *Three Who Made a Revolution* and was serving as a part-time consultant with the Voice.

During my visit, Wolfe told me about an unknown man who had contacted the State Department and suggested that much of Russia's enigmatic behavior in the Cold War might become explicable if one took account of the possibility that Stalin was paranoid. "The Department didn't know how to get rid of him and sent him to me," Wolfe said with a wry smile, "and I got rid of him." Not knowing much about paranoia but realizing that the unknown man and I were on the same general intellectual wavelength, I felt leaden inside. From the point of view of people like Wolfe, not to mention the Department of State, that man and I were crackpots.

Back in Moscow in late 1952 and the fear-filled early months of 1953, when the Soviet press was printing ominous stories about Jewish "doctor-murderers" who were alleged to have conspired with the Anglo-American intelligence services and the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to shorten the lives of Soviet leaders, I was coming to the conclusion that if Stalin, then in his 70s, were to die, all sorts of changes might occur rather suddenly in the Soviet regime's conduct. If it were acting out a neurotic personality's needs in politics, it would no longer be under compulsion to do so once he was dead.

Theoretically, some other individual of like character could take over dictatorial power and pursue the same sort of politics. But it was unlikely that a highly neurotic Stalin would tolerate the presence of an individual of his own psychological makeup in his entourage; he would, rather, surround himself with steady, pliable, unthreatening types unafflicted by compulsions like his own. Change would come if Stalin were to die. Maybe the regime would call off the terroristic new purge that was apparently in the making with preparations for the trial of the "doctor-murderers."

Then, in other small ways, the Soviet government would stop acting against its own interests (one of Karen Horney's observations was that every neurotic tends to act in ways contrary to his own best interests). For example, at the outset of 1953 the Soviet government was pressuring the U.S. and British governments to move their Moscow embassies some distance away from their longstanding locations on either side of the Kremlin. Why was this happening? Might it be that a Stalin neurotically enraged against the Anglo-Americans wanted the embassies moved out of sight from his Kremlin workplace, whence their flags could be seen flying on special occasions like the Fourth of July?

In addition, the psychological hypothesis seemed relevant to a situation close to me personally: my wife's lack of an exit visa. It had never been easy for foreign governments to secure Soviet permission for Russian wives of their nationals to leave. But, however grudgingly, a handful of

visas would be issued about once a year. The last time that happened was in early 1946, shortly before our marriage. Then in 1947 the official legal gazette published a governmental decree saying simply: "To prohibit marriages between Soviet citizens and foreigners." After that, Russians who had married before the decree's passage were denied exit visas, although the anti-marriage law was not explicitly retroactive.

Numerous high-placed foreigners had interceded with the Soviet government on behalf of the few women married to foreign nationals, but to no avail. When a foreign ambassador took up the matter with Foreign Minister Vyshinsky, the latter would get red in the face and declare that his government considered it a closed question. At that time, there were six Americans in Moscow with Russian wives (two embassy employees and four press correspondents). It was clearly contrary to the Soviet government's best interests to allow such a trivial matter to fester in relations with our own and other foreign governments. Why was this happening?

A Horneyan explanation occurred to me. If the public cult of Stalin was an institutionalization of a neurotically idealized self, then given the fact that he was ruler of the Soviet Union, the idealizing must extend to his realm, save insofar as evil, conspiring enemies sought to spoil the picture. Logically, then, any criticism, any demeaning of the Soviet state over which the idealized Stalin presided, would, by implication, be a demeaning of him as the all-wise, all-beneficent genius-leader that he took himself to be. The Soviet press provided a daily image of the Soviet realm that fit with this interpretation: it idealized life in Stalin's Russia, except insofar as enemies tried to harm the state and society.

What, then, would have been the aging, ever more severely neurotic Stalin's response to a statement by his foreign minister in, say, 1947 that the ministry was prepared to issue exit visas to some Soviet women married to foreigners? He would have reasoned that their willingness to go live abroad was an implicit derogation of his state, and this would have made him so furious that he would have rejected the proposed issuance of visas and added: "There must be a law against these marriages!"

If that was how the law came into being and why the authorities refused even to discuss the question with foreign envoys, Stalin's death might open the way for our departure. One night when my wife and I went out for a walk, I explained this line of thought and said: "If Stalin dies, I bet they'll let you go." Even she was discouraging. "Georgians are long-lived," she said. "He'll probably outlive you and me."

On March 4, 1953, I arrived at the translation service's offices at the normal time. The Soviet newspapers were late that morning -- usually a sign of an especially important item coming up. I thought it would be an announcement that the trial of the "doctor-murderers" had begun. Just then I met an American woman who was one of our typists. Ashen-faced, she said that she had heard a statement on Moscow radio that something was the matter with Stalin.

A few minutes later the papers came. A front-page announcement said, "Comrade Stalin is gravely ill" and gave details about the stroke he had suffered. This of course meant that Stalin was dead or as good as dead, and the thought crossed my mind that some person or persons high in the regime who felt threatened by the impending new purge for which the doctor's trial would

be the signal might have acted to shorten Stalin's life so as to prevent the trial from starting and the purge from taking place.

But what I mainly want to record is that never in my life, before or since, have I experienced such intense elation as I did at that moment. It was compounded of joy that one of history's awful evildoers was meeting his end, hope that this might mean early release of my wife and hence of me from a stay in Russia that had now lengthened into nearly nine years, and excitement that my hypothesis was going to be tested. Would Russia after Stalin change in the ways that I expected? It did not take long for the answer to come, and it was affirmative.

For about two weeks, Russia's public life focused on the ceremonial send-off. There was a final burst of the Stalin cult in the press encomia. He was praised in the three funeral speeches which were broadcast over the radio, but it was notable that only Molotov sounded brokenhearted; Malenkov sounded calm and collected, and Beria was briskly upbeat. Once the eave-taking ended, a subtle but deep change came over Soviet public life. The terror-tinged atmosphere of the first months of the year evaporated like mist in the morning sun.

The threatened purge never took place. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, now again under Beria (who had not been in direct charge of it during the last period of Stalin's life) issued a sensational lengthy public statement in mid-April denouncing the Doctors' affair as a frame-up (it did not say by whom) and revealing that "inadmissible methods" (meaning torture) had been used to extract from the hapless doctor-victims confessions of guilt for non-existent crimes; not all of them, it said, had survived the ordeal. In conclusion, the statement assured Soviet citizens that now they could live and work in security. This was a thinly veiled reference to the general insecurity of only two months earlier.

It took no Kremlinological expertise for politically literate citizens to grasp the implicit indictment of Stalin. By then his name was hardly to be seen in the Soviet press; the Stalin cult was a thing of the past. The spring of 1953 in Moscow reminded me of the spring of 1945, when victory, peace, and hope for the future came to Russia all at once. Ilya Ehrenburg captured the spirit of that time in his novel, *The Thaw*.

The change was felt no less quickly in foreign relations. The American and British embassies were informed that there was no necessity of their moving to new locations. Steps began to be taken toward winding down the Cold War, notably by reviving talks that soon led to an armistice in Korea on terms that the Communist side had stubbornly rejected while Stalin lived. In May Charles Bohlen arrived in Moscow to take up the post of American ambassador.

It was decided to raise the question of the Russian wives of Americans as a test of the new atmosphere. Molotov now headed the Foreign Ministry. Instead of angrily refusing to consider the question when Bohlen raised it, he calmly said that he would look into it. Three weeks later, visas that had been denied for seven years were granted, and before June was out my wife and I were on our way West. Later in 1953, the anti-marriage law of 1947 was repealed in a governmental decree as laconic as the earlier one.

Back in the United States after an interim assignment in Paris, I took a job with the Social Science Division of the RAND Corporation while working at night to complete an interrupted philosophy doctorate with a dissertation on Marx and German philosophy. RAND wanted me to write interpretive studies of Soviet internal and external policy after Stalin. To clarify what was new in Soviet policy after Stalin, I had to go into his influence on earlier policies, and this inevitably led me into psychological analysis.

The Social Science Division under Hans Speier was generally supportive so long as I devoted primary attention to developments *after* Stalin, and I wrote a few studies, subsequently published in scholarly journals, which touched on my psychological interpretation in the course of seeking to explain post-Stalin policies. But the thesis that a really profound change had occurred with Stalin's death *because* of the psychological factor at work in the politics pursued while he lived met with resistance. I was advised not to focus on history.

Besides, it was asked, what had really changed? There was of course the armistice in Korea and, in 1955, the Austrian peace treaty that Stalin had withheld, and some other smaller steps. But might not all this be explained by pressures on the Soviet regime? Or, might it not be simply "tactical," the politics of a younger, more "flexible" Soviet political leadership?

Now I was experiencing the problem of historical evidence, arising out of the fact that whatever happens in history is subject to differing interpretations, depending on one's underlying assumptions. From my psychological point of view, a small political act like the release of the wives was highly significant, apart from the meaning it had for the few persons immediately affected. Like little changes in a person, it manifested change in the character of the actor -- in this case the Soviet regime.

Minds trained in the political and social sciences didn't seem to see it so. Their tendency, rather, was to reason that small changes in regime behavior had best be thought of as having small causes, whereas big changes would call for large causes. I disagreed, but not persuasively except to a few friends who found my reasoning plausible albeit undemonstrable. Without know it, I was on my way to becoming a historian of the Stalin era. The idea of becoming a biographer, however, was still remote. I simply wanted to produce a study of a totalitarian dictatorship that would disclose the personality of the dictator as a motor force of the regime's politics.

Another great evidential problem confronted me. What evidence did I have that Stalin was really a neurotic personality? We knew so little of the man himself. When he appeared in public, he had seemed modest, unassuming, oblivious of his own personality. To read his psychological makeup through the public Stalin was, to say the least, questionable, because the evidential value of this material turned on its meaning to him, and that we didn't know.

Then came something unexpected -- a windfall in the form of Nikita Khrushchev's secret report about Stalin to the 20th Party Congress, a copy of which came into American hands and was published in the *New York Times* on June 5, 1956. In this lengthy document, most significantly called "On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences," a one-time admiring protégé, who had become one of the dictator's lieutenants and observed him at close hand from the late 1930s to his death, offered abundant first-hand testimony that Stalin was a man of colossal grandiosity

along with profound insecurity that caused him to need constant affirmation of his imagined greatness.

Khrushchev portrayed a neurotic personality precisely in Horney's sense, an example of the "arrogant-vindictive" type described in *Neurosis and Human Growth*. A self-idealizer insatiably hungry for the glorification of himself that the public cult provided, Stalin was easily aroused to vindictive hostility by whatever appeared to derogate his inflated vision of himself as a leader and teacher of genius. His aggression, typically expressed in purges, were -- it followed from Khrushchev's account -- the other side of his self-glorification.

A more concrete picture of Khrushchev's testimony will emerge from just a few examples. Stalin personally edited the glorifying *Short Biography* of himself published in 1947, and in so doing "marked the very places where he thought that the praise of his services was insufficient. Thus he inserted the following sentence: "Although he performed his task as leader of the party and the people with consummate skill and enjoyed the unreserved support of the entire Soviet people, Stalin never allowed his work to be marred by the slightest hint of vanity, conceit, or self-adulation." He also added this one: "Comrade Stalin's genius enabled him to divine the enemy's plans and defeat them. The battles in which Comrade Stalin directed the Soviet armies are brilliant examples of operational military skill."

Stalin created Stalin prizes but no Lenin prizes, Khrushchev added, noting that "not even the Tsars" created prizes named after themselves. In 1951 Stalin signed a resolution of the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers on the erection of an impressive monument to Stalin on the newly built Volga-Don Canal, though he kept postponing the decision passed much earlier by the party to build a Palace of the Soviets as a monument to Lenin.

Much more such evidence was to appear in Soviet publications during Khrushchev's tenure, and still more in the memoirs that he dictated following his ouster in 1964. But the secret report was the crucial source. My hypothesis was now confirmed to my own satisfaction, and the task was to get on with the study. In 1958 I finished and defended my dissertation on Marx and became a teacher of Soviet politics, first at Indiana University and later at Princeton. Finally, in 1964-65, I had a year of academic leave at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, and with it the opportunity to work on Stalin.

There was only one problem: I didn't know how to carry out the task. My aim was to write a political scientist's tract on dictatorship from a psychological perspective, not a Stalin biography. The idea came of constructing the study as a scholarly whodunit, and I wrote a 50-page first chapter entitled "The Making of a Dictator." Starting with Stalin's ascension to supreme leadership in 1929, it showed how he made himself an autocrat by his terroristic purges of the 1930s. To prove that he was not yet a dictator in 1929, I had to clarify the origin of the role of leader (*vozhd'*) in Russian Communism.

Despite the existence of a large literature on Lenin and the early years of Soviet power, I found no study of the leader role that Lenin created as the founder of Bolshevism at the start of the century. Chapter two addressed that question, arguing that Lenin could lead the Bolshevik party without being a dictator because he had acquired charismatic authority in Bolshevik's eyes from

the time of their movement's formation, and by the crucial part he played in the party's coming to power in 1917.

Why the Bolshevik regime underwent transformation into an autocratic one under Stalin became the issue. An important factor favoring that outcome, it seemed, was the political culture of Russian Tsarism as a system of autocracy. I knew something about that from my reading during the Embassy years in old Russian history books that I found in secondhand bookstores in Moscow. So I wrote a third long chapter, "The Tsarist Autocratic Tradition," not realizing at the time that this material, or most of it, was destined to become a part of the second volume of a study that would turn into a trilogy.

Now, paradoxically, what was to have been a personality study in its fundamental character was shaping up as something else. Save for the introductory chapter, Stalin as a personality hardly entered the picture until the last part of what would become volume one of the trilogy. There, in discussing the rise of his personality cult in 1929, I went back to his early life as a revolutionary in order to show the ways in which the idealized Stalin image that formed the cult's centerpiece was touched up and in places falsified.

So, when the volume later published under the title *Stalin As Revolutionary 1879-1929* was finished in draft and submitted to the publisher in 1971, my two editors returned it to me with a gentle but clear indication that major revisions were needed, because something was wrong with the book's structure.

A trip to Europe in the summer of 1971 afforded some leisure for thinking, and by fall, when it was my good fortune to have a semester of academic leave, a program of revision was becoming clear in my mind. By now I saw that chronology could not be cavalierly disregarded. At the very least, Stalin's early life and early revolutionary career would have to be treated early on. I think this was the point at which biography as a genre grew interesting to me, or at any rate not something from which I instinctively shrank as something outside my ken.

The solution to my structural problem proved rather easy in the sequel. Once my mind was open to the possibility and desirability of being biographical, the way to do it was simple. The chapter on Lenin as the founder and leader of the Bolshevik movement led me naturally into the pathways of biography. The question became: how did a young Georgian of lowly origin named Iosif Djughashvili become a follower of Lenin early in the century?

There was no way to answer this question with generalities; an interpretation of my subject as a young individual became providentially unavoidable. Nor would it help to describe Horney's profile of the "arrogant-vindictive" neurotic personality type and try to show that Djughashvili was a case in point. True, his wretched early family life, the brutal beatings inflicted on his mother and on him by his drunken father, would easily have produced the basic anxiety that forms the psychological soil in which a neurosis can grow. Biographical interpretation could and should take this into account. Further, what was known of Djughashvili's boyhood showed a definite streak of self-idealizing, which continued during his years in the Tiflis theological seminary when he entered the local revolutionary underground, and subsequently as well. He definitely was neurotic.

Instead of dealing in such abstract categories from a book of psychology, however, I was now using that book as guidance in a biographer's effort to portray his subject as an individual. More work brought to light Djugashvili's discovery, in Lenin, of a heroic identity-figure who inspired him to adopt a Lenin-like revolutionary pseudonym, "Stalin," or man of steel, as the symbol of his idealized revolutionary self. Here I was making use of Freud's concept of "identification," a process which "endeavors to mold a person's own ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model." But, again, the concept was being applied in the context of biography.

The Lenin-identification carried momentous implications for an understanding of Djugashvili's personality, among them the fact that he would feel driven one day to match or outdo his identity-figure in revolutionary accomplishment of world-historic importance. Earlier on, the Lenin-identification resulted in the Russification of Djugashvili's national self-consciousness. Since the identity-figure was a Russian revolutionist, he must be Russian too, and yet the Russian revolutionary persona that he thus fashioned for himself as Stalin was inevitably going to be in conflict all his life with his ineradicably Georgian empirical self as Djugashvili. This disparity, which had political consequences both large and small, was fated to be an inner conflict of the sort that Horney had found to be one of the normal vicissitudes of neurotic life.

Now one could begin to see how Stalin would necessarily come into murderous conflict with many fellow Old Bolsheviks and others who were aware not simply of his original national identity but, more importantly, of the spotted actuality of his character and his revolutionary past. One could see how he was going to be driven to have history rewritten to the specifications of his idealized Stalin self, for which purpose (among others) tyrannical power was a prerequisite. This is how a work took shape that might be described as *biography-centered history*.

It never became -- fortunately -- the political-science tract that it started out to be, but neither did it become a conventional biography of a historically influential person. It became a study in history and personality devoted to showing how history shaped an individual who, in turn, greatly influenced history itself -- the history of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, the history of the Soviet Union, and the history of the world. In the process of producing this study, the author became, *malgré lui*, a sort of biographer.

The reader will doubtless be interested in my attitude toward this historical figure who has absorbed so large a part of my scholarly lifetime (and, alas, I am still only completing the second of the three projected volumes) that friends have begun calling me Stalin's last victim.

From the start, as I think this memoir shows, it was intellectual fascination with an unusual hypothesis that inspired me. The fact is that I loathe Stalin, and the better I have come to know him as my biographical subject, the more intense my loathing has grown. Especially in the process of working on the second volume, dealing with the transformation of the Soviet Union in Stalin's "revolution from above" of the 1930s, I have come to detest him in a way that I never did during the Moscow years or immediate post-Moscow years. Then I was, above all, conscious of the formidable intellectual challenge of the task I was undertaking. I never mistook my subject for a decent man, but the bottomless depth of his villainy was not clear to me; now it is.

I believe with R.G. Collingwood that history is the reenactment of past thought. Its aim is "the discerning of the thought which is the inner side of the event." The proper task of historians is "penetrating to the thought of the agents whose acts they are studying." Now that I have been living through the 1930s with Stalin, trying to reconstruct his acts as they took shape antecedently in his mind, I believe, rightly or wrongly, that I know him well enough to be able to think things out as he did and, in that sense, to be Stalin in the process of reaching key decisions and acting to implement them.

This has led me to comprehend, far more clearly than before, the depth of his duplicity, his capacity to deceive both individuals and large groups and to lull intended future victims into a false sense of security. I have come face to face with Stalin's all but unbelievable indifference to the suffering that he caused and his ability to take delight in inflicting torment upon people he saw as enemies and others whose only guilt lay in association with the former.

Khrushchev testifies in the secret report that on January 20, 1939, Stalin dispatched a coded telegram to high party and police officials throughout the country saying that "physical pressure should still be used obligatorily as an exception applicable to known and obstinate enemies of the people, as a method both justifiable and appropriate." This is amply documented by other sources. "Physical pressure" meant torture. Stalin was determined that those labeled enemies must be tortured. If, as I believe, the worst of human vices is cruelty, this man may have been the most vicious individual ever to wield power. Certainly he was one of them.

The real mystery to me is no longer Stalin's thoughts and actions, but why some old associates failed to lift a hand against him while it was still possible to prevent him from going on his murderous spree through Soviet society in the later 1930s. There were in the Politburo of 1934, alongside such creatures of Stalin as Kaganovich and Voroshilov, some men of independent mind and standing like Kirov, Kuibyshev, and Ordzhonikidze. They were tough Bolsheviks but not evildoers of Stalin's stripe or anything like that, and they could not have wanted to see him succeed in finally wrecking what was left of the Revolution.

Kirov may with difficulty be forgiven his own inaction. But when he was assassinated on December 1, 1934, by what a perceptive man of the inner circle could see must be Stalin's machination, I cannot comprehend the failure of Ordzhonikidze and Kuibyshev to act. They must have known then that Stalin, like a mad dog, had to be destroyed. They still had access to him, they sat around the table with him at Politburo sessions. Sometimes in the quiet of my study I have found myself bursting out to their ghosts: "For God's sake, stab him with a knife, or pick up a heavy object and bash his brains out, the lives you save may include your own!" (Kuibyshev died under mysterious circumstances in early 1935 and Ordzhonikidze was forced by Stalin to commit suicide in early 1937.)

Untold hundreds of thousands of Communist and other lives could have been saved, and untold damage to the Soviet Union averted. Take the behavior of Mikhail Tomsky, to whose apartment Stalin went with a bottle of wine in 1936, according to Roy Medvedev's oral-history evidence, very probably to solicit Tomsky's help in the contemplated purge trial of his ex-rightist associates Bukharin and Rykov. Tomsky showed Stalin to the door with curses, went back to his study, took a pistol and shot himself to death. Why didn't he shoot Stalin first?

I cannot answer such questions, but I think the fact that I ask them discloses the nature and strength of my feelings. The issue is whether they impair what capacity I otherwise may have to produce a sound scholarly biography-centered study of the Soviet 1930s. In *apologia*, let me revert to my original design to write the work as a scholarly whodunit. It suggests that there lay in my mind for a long time the thought that I was on the track of a criminal and his crimes.

Pursuing the analogy, what is or should be a detective's attitude toward his quarry? He must, it seems to me, do everything possible, like a Collingwoodian historian (and it is notable that Collingwood in *The Idea of History* expounds his view of history-writing with an imaginary example in a section entitled "Who Killed John Doe?"), to reenact the thought underlying the criminal deed, and then to put himself into the fugitive's mind to such an extent that he can divine the man's likely pathways of escape and likely present whereabouts.

Is the detective's horror at the nature of the crime and hatred of the criminal for having committed it going to cripple his capacity to fulfill his professional duty in this manner? I had best leave the question open, but my own view is that they do not. But is the analogy itself, the idea of Stalin as a criminal and some of his key historical actions of the 1930s as crimes, misleading? Might it not blind one to the constructive accomplishments of that decade under Stalin's leadership of the country? It could do that, but it need not, for even criminals, the biggest ones in fact, can make positive contributions to the community in their careers of crime and, indeed, as a logical concomitant of the courses of action on which they are embarked.

A final qualification is, however, in order. Stalin was despicable as a man and ruler, but he didn't know it. He did not see himself as the villain of history that he was -- or so I believe. The Stalin biographer must, therefore, be most careful not to attribute to his historical villain a consciousness of his own villainy. In the effort to reenact the villain's thought, he must be able to see and if possible to show how the villain managed to reconcile his duplicities and his most cruel deeds with the inner picture of himself as a righteous man and a good and noble ruler. This takes a bit of doing, but the whole meaning and worth of the scholarly enterprise rest upon it. Why this postulate is so important to me probably goes back to the strange way in which I first became involved with the Stalin question

"For once, a sniper memoir that goes far beyond a catalogue of kills. Lyudmila Pavlichenko writes from the viewpoint of a trained historian, and so Lady Death -- in addition to being a very good read -- not only gives a broad perspective of the campaigns in which she fought but also the political background into which she had to blend." And an empowering story of a woman establishing herself in a purely masculine world. And it ends with meetings with Stalin, Roosevelt and Charlie Chaplin. The surprises kept coming with every page and I was not looking forward to finishing the book. Read more. The old maxim *cherchez la femme* can do duty in my case to explain why someone who never intended to be a biographer became a sort of one, although reluctantly and after long delay. The femme was the revisionist of psychoanalytic thought, Karen Horney. I became acquainted with her through her writings, starting around 1940. When her last and synthesizing book, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, was published in 1950, I was in Moscow, a member of the American Embassy. I ordered a copy from Brentano's in Washington via the diplomatic pouch. I read it repeatedly. Despite its lucidity of expression, i Joseph Stalin, secretary-general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1922–53) and premier of the Soviet state (1941–53), who for a quarter of a century dictatorially ruled the Soviet Union and transformed it into a major world power. Learn more about Stalin in this article. Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what you've submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! External Websites. History Learning Site - Biography of Joseph Stalin. RT Russiapedia - Biography of Joseph Stalin. Spartacus Educational - Biography of Joseph Stalin. Britannica Websites. Articles from Britannica Encyclopedias for elementary and high school students. Download biography's joseph stalin fact card. Reform and Famine. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Stalin reversed the Bolshevik agrarian policy by seizing land given earlier to the peasants and organizing collective farms. Convinced of the Allies' hostility toward the Soviet Union, Stalin became obsessed with the threat of an invasion from the West. Between 1945 and 1948, he established Communist regimes in many Eastern European countries, creating a vast buffer zone between Western Europe and "Mother Russia." Western powers interpreted these actions as proof of Stalin's desire to place Europe under Communist control, thus formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to counter Soviet influence.