

COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Joseph Stalin

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(1879-1953)

Joseph Stalin, infamous for his campaigns of terror, was totalitarian dictator of the USSR from 1941 until his death in 1953. Stalin's policy of state-organized industrialization turned his country into a industrial and military power second only to the USA.

From "Stalin, Joseph." Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2001.

Joseph Stalin was general secretary of the Communist Party of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from 1922 to 1953. [By many accounts, Stalin,] more than any other individual, molded the features that characterized the Soviet regime and shaped the direction of Europe after World War II ended in 1945.

Stalin was born Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili in the town of Gori, Georgia, which at the time was part of the vast Russian empire. He was the third and only surviving child of a cobbler and a housecleaner. In 1888 Stalin began attending the Gori Church School, where he learned Russian and excelled at his studies, winning a scholarship to the Tbilisi Theological Seminary in the Georgian capital in 1894.

Stalin began his studies at the seminary as a devout believer in Orthodox Christianity. He was soon exposed to the radical ideas of fellow students, however, and began to read illegal literature based on the works of German political philosopher Karl Marx. In 1899, just as he was about to graduate, he gave up his religious education to devote his time to the revolutionary movement against the Russian monarchy. While employed as an accountant in Tbilisi, Stalin spread Marxist propaganda among railway workers on behalf of the local Social Democratic organization. After moving to the seaport of Bat'umi, where he organized a large workers' demonstration in 1902, Stalin was hunted down and arrested by the imperial police. A year later he was sentenced to exile in the Russian region of Siberia. He soon managed to escape, however, and was back in Georgia by early 1904.

When the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) split into Menshevik and Bolshevik factions in 1903, Stalin was drawn to the more militant Bolsheviks, who were led by Vladimir Lenin. In Georgia, where Menshevism predominated, Stalin soon gained a reputation as a

belligerent and staunch follower of Lenin, whom he had first met in 1905 at a conference in Finland.

In 1905 Stalin married Yekaterina Svanidze, a Georgian woman who died two years later. Stalin was arrested and exiled by imperial police in 1908 because of his illegal underground activities. His escape the next year was followed by further arrests, exiles, and secret trips abroad during the years leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917. In 1912 Lenin elevated Stalin, who by this time had adopted the Russian pseudonym meaning "man of steel," to the leading Bolshevik Party body, the Central Committee. At Lenin's behest, Stalin wrote his chief theoretical work, *Marxism and the National Question*. Stalin was arrested and sent to Siberia before the essay was published in 1913.

Stalin was released from exile upon the overthrow of the Russian monarchy in the February (or March, in the New Style calendar) phase of the Russian Revolution. He went to Petrograd (later Leningrad; now St. Petersburg), where he became a member of the party's Central Committee bureau. He then asserted editorial control over the party newspaper, *Pravda (Truth)*.

Although he did not play a prominent role in the Bolshevik takeover of the government in October (November, New Style), Stalin became a member of the new government's Soviet (Council) of People's Commissars (Russian acronym, Sovnarkom), heading the Commissariat for Nationality Affairs. Given the vital importance of nationality issues at a time when the Bolsheviks were trying to keep the territories of the former Russian Empire under their power, Stalin's post was crucial to the Bolshevik victory in the ensuing Russian Civil War (1918-1921). He was elected a member of the Communist Party's highest decision-making body, the Politburo, and the Central Committee's Orgburo (Organizational Bureau) in 1919. As a political commissar in the Red Army during the height of the civil war, Stalin supervised military activities against the counterrevolutionary White forces along the western front that were led by General Pyotr Wrangel. During the war between Russia and Poland from 1920 to 1921, his decisions as a political commissar ended in disaster and led to a long-standing conflict with Commissar of War Leon Trotsky. Meanwhile, Stalin, whose first wife had died in 1907, married Nadezhda Alliluyeva in 1918 and moved with the government from Petrograd to Moscow.

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After the Bolshevik victory in the civil war, Stalin threw himself into organizational work and administrative tasks. Having served as commissar for state control since 1919, he continued this post until 1923, while in 1922 he was elected general secretary of the Communist Party, a position that gave him control over appointments and established a base for his political power. Stalin's rude and aggressive behavior brought him into conflict with the ailing Lenin, who shortly before his death in 1924 wrote his political "testament" in which he voiced misgivings about Stalin. In the testament Lenin expressed doubt whether the party's general secretary would use his authority with sufficient caution, and he called for Stalin's removal from the post. Adroit political maneuvering enabled Stalin to have Lenin's testament discounted and suppressed, however, while Lenin's death freed Stalin to establish a ruling coalition with Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinovyev, excluding Stalin's rival Trotsky from the succession struggle. Stalin reversed his course in 1925 and joined with Nikolay Bukharin and Aleksey Rykov in a new coalition against his former partners, who in turn joined with Trotsky in 1926 to form an intraparty bloc against Stalin known as the "Left Opposition." Once Stalin had succeeded in defeating these opponents, in 1928 he then turned against his former allies Bukharin and Rykov. By the end of 1929 Stalin had succeeded in political maneuvers that eliminated his political opponents and established him as the supreme leader of the USSR.

In the late 1920s Stalin decided the New Economic Policy (NEP), which Lenin had introduced in 1921 to facilitate postwar economic recovery by encouraging limited private enterprise, no longer worked. The rate of economic growth was declining and peasants were not producing enough grain to satisfy demand. Instead of giving the peasants economic incentives to raise production, Stalin chose a policy that forced them into state-owned collective farms. Simultaneously, he pressed forward with a program of rapid industrialization, which began with the ambitious first Five-Year Plan in 1928. Stalin believed the Soviet Union had to industrialize rapidly in order to strengthen the Communist regime and enable the country to defend itself against foreign enemies. The plan, which was financed by exploiting resources in the countryside, resulted in the near collapse of Soviet agriculture and the deaths of millions of peasants from famine. Industrialization was achieved, but at great cost....

Although Stalin's policy in the mid-1930s was to support the Communist International (Comintern) in forming a popular front against the rise of fascism in Europe, he gave up the idea of collective security with the West and in August 1939 decided upon an alliance with Nazi

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Germany. The "Secret Protocols" of the German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact carved up Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence; the Soviets allowed Germany to invade Poland in exchange for Hitler's promised non-aggression against Soviet territory. Despite warnings, Stalin was taken by surprise in June 1941 when the Nazis launched Operation Barbarossa, a three-pronged attack against the USSR. Although the Soviets were poorly prepared for the invasion and at first suffered huge losses, the country rallied behind Stalin, who assumed direct leadership of the war effort. Following their defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad in January 1943, the Nazis lost the initiative and were finally forced to retreat in 1945, which allowed Soviet troops to move into Eastern Europe. Having obtained recognition from Allied governments of a Soviet sphere of influence in these newly liberated countries, Stalin established puppet Communist regimes and drew the so-called Iron Curtain between Eastern and Western Europe.

In 1947 the Soviets established the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), an international body of Communist leaders that was to ensure conformity with the Soviet line. Yugoslavia was expelled from the alliance in 1948 after Stalin condemned renegade Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito for refusing to follow Soviet orders. That same year Moscow announced a blockade of Berlin, fueling the Cold War with the West. Stalin was determined to catch up with the United States in developing the atomic bomb; he ordered that no resources be spared toward that goal, which was achieved in August 1953, shortly after his death.

By 1950 Stalin's mental and physical health had begun to deteriorate and he was absent from the Kremlin, the government headquarters in Moscow, for long periods of time. His subordinates were fearful of becoming victims of Stalin's growing paranoia, which manifested itself in plans for another purge. In January 1953 Stalin ordered the arrest of a group of Kremlin doctors on charges of plotting the medical murder of high-level Soviet officials. Just as a renewal of mass terror seemed imminent, Stalin died of complications from a stroke in March. Although the nation was plunged into grief, Stalin's political successors expressed relief and moved quickly to reverse some of the most brutal features of his regime. Nikita Khrushchev, who replaced Stalin as general secretary (called first secretary until 1966) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), denounced Stalin's methods of rule and political theories, known as Stalinism, in his "secret speech" to the 20th Party Congress in 1956.

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Stalin's historical legacy is overwhelmingly negative. Although his policies transformed the USSR from an agrarian-based society into an industrialized nation with a powerful military arsenal, the transformation was accomplished at the cost of millions of lives. Stalin's militant distrust of the West and his assertion of Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe gave rise to the Cold War. His purges of society through violent police terror left a permanent scar on the collective memory of the people under his rule. Although admired by some Russians, most would agree with the assessment in the West that Stalin was one of the cruelest dictators in history.

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