# STALIN

## *The Court of the Red Tsar*

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## THE HOLIDAY DINNER

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At around 7 p.m. on 8 November 1932, Nadya Alliluyeva Stalin, aged thirty-one, the oval-faced and brown-eyed wife of the Bolshevik General Secretary, was dressing for the raucous annual party to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the Revolution. Puritanical, earnest but fragile, Nadya prided herself on her 'Bolshevik modesty', wearing the dullest and most shapeless dresses, draped in plain shawls, with square-necked blouses and no make-up. But tonight, she was making a special effort. In the Stalins' gloomy apartment in the two-storey seventeenth-century Poteshny Palace, she twirled for her sister, Anna, in a long, unusually fashionable black dress with red roses embroidered around it, imported from Berlin. For once, she had indulged in a 'stylish hairdo' instead of her usual severe bun. She playfully placed a scarlet tea rose in her black hair.

The party, attended by all the Bolshevik magnates, such as Premier Molotov and his slim, clever and flirtatious wife, Polina, Nadya's best friend, was held annually by the Defence Commissar, Voroshilov: he lived in the long, thin Horse Guards building just five steps across a little lane from the Poteshny. In the tiny, intimate world of the Bolshevik élite, those simple, cheerful soirées usually ended with the potentates and their women dancing Cossack jigs and singing Georgian laments. But that night, the party did not end as usual.

Simultaneously, a few hundred yards to the east, closer to Lenin's Mausoleum and Red Square, in his office on the second floor of the triangular eighteenth-century Yellow Palace, Joseph Stalin, the General Secretary of the Bolshevik Party and the *Vozhd* – the leader – of the Soviet Union, now fifty-three, twenty-two years Nadya's senior, and the father of her two children, was meeting his favoured secret policeman. Genrikh Yagoda, Deputy Chairman of the GPU,* a ferret-faced Jewish

jeweller's son from Nizhny Novgorod with a 'Hitlerish moustache' and a taste for orchids, German pornography and literary friendships, informed Stalin of new plots against him in the Party and more turbulence in the countryside.

Stalin, assisted by Molotov, forty-two, and his economics chief, Valerian Kuibyshev, forty-five, who looked like a mad poet, with wild hair, an enthusiasm for drink, women and, appropriately, writing poetry, ordered the arrest of those who opposed them. The stress of those months was stifling as Stalin feared losing the Ukraine itself which, in parts, had descended into a dystopia of starvation and disorder. When Yagoda left at 7.05 p.m., the others stayed talking about their war to 'break the back' of the peasantry, whatever the cost to the millions starving in history's greatest man-made famine. They were determined to use the grain to finance their gargantuan push to make Russia a modern industrial power. But that night, the tragedy would be closer to home: Stalin was to face a personal crisis that was the most wounding and mysterious of his career. He would replay it over and over again for the rest of his days.

At 8.05 p.m., Stalin, accompanied by the others, ambled down the steps towards the party, through the snowy alleyways and squares of that red-walled medieval fortress, dressed in his Party tunic, baggy old trousers, soft leather boots, old army greatcoat and his wolf *shapka* with earmuffs. His left arm was slightly shorter than the other but much less noticeable than it became in old age – and he was usually smoking a cigarette or puffing on his pipe. The head and the thick, low hair, still black but with specks of the first grey, radiated the graceful strength of the mountain-men of the Caucasus; his almost Oriental, feline eyes were 'honey-coloured' but flashed a lupine yellow in anger. Children found his moustache prickly and his smell of tobacco acrid but, as Molotov and his female admirers recalled, Stalin was still attractive to women with whom he flirted shyly and clumsily.[1]

This small, sturdy figure, five feet, six inches tall, who walked ponderously yet briskly with a rough pigeon-toed gait (which was studiously aped by Bolshoi actors when they were playing Tsars), chatting softly to Molotov in his heavy Georgian accent, was only protected by one or two guards. The magnates strolled around Moscow with hardly any security. Even the suspicious Stalin, who was already

* The Soviet secret police was first called the Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage, known as the Cheka. In 1922, it became the State Political Administration (GPU) then the United GPU: OGPU. In 1934, it was subsumed into the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD). However, secret policemen were still known as 'Chekists' and the secret police itself as 'the Organs'. In 1941 and 1943, State Security was separated into its own Commissariat, the NKGB. From 1954 to 1991, it became a Committee of State Security, the KGB.

hated in the countryside, walked home from his Old Square office with just one bodyguard. Molotov and Stalin were walking home one night in a snowstorm 'with no bodyguards' through the Manege Square when they were approached by a beggar. Stalin gave him ten roubles and the disappointed tramp shouted: 'You damned bourgeois!'

'Who can understand our people?' mused Stalin. Despite assassinations of Soviet officials (including an attempt on Lenin in 1918), things were remarkably relaxed until the June 1927 assassination of the Soviet Ambassador to Poland, when there was a slight tightening of security. In 1930, the Politburo passed a decree 'to ban Comrade Stalin from walking around town on foot'. Yet he continued his strolling for a few more years. This was a golden age which, in just a few hours, was to end in death, if not murder.[2]

Stalin was already famous for his Sphinxian inscrutability, and phlegmatic modesty, represented by the pipe he ostentatiously puffed like a peasant elder. Far from being the colourless bureaucratic mediocrity disdained by Trotsky, the real Stalin was an energetic and vainglorious melodramatist who was exceptional in every way.

Beneath the eerie calm of these unfathomable waters were deadly whirlpools of ambition, anger and unhappiness. Capable both of moving with controlled gradualism and of reckless gambles, he seemed enclosed inside a cold suit of steely armour but his antennae were intensely sensitive and his fiery Georgian temper was so uncontrollable that he had almost ruined his career by unleashing it against Lenin's wife. He was a mercurial neurotic with the tense, seething temperament of a highly-strung actor who revels in his own drama – what his ultimate successor, Nikita Khrushchev, called a *litsedei*, a man of many faces. Lazar Kaganovich, one of his closest comrades for over thirty years who was also on his way to the dinner, left the best description of this 'unique character': he was a 'different man at different times … I knew no less than five or six Stalins.'

However, the opening of his archives, and many newly available sources, illuminate him more than ever before: it is no longer enough to describe him as an 'enigma'. We now know how he talked (constantly about himself, often with revealing honesty), how he wrote notes and letters, what he ate, sang and read. Placed in the context of the fissiparous Bolshevik leadership, a unique environment, he becomes a real person. The man inside was a super-intelligent and gifted politician for whom his own historic role was paramount, a nervy intellectual who manically read history and literature, a fidgety hypochondriac suffering from chronic tonsillitis, psoriasis, rheumatic aches from his deformed arm and the iciness of his Siberian exile. Garrulous, sociable and a fine singer, this lonely and unhappy man ruined every love relationship and friendship in his life by sacrificing happiness to political necessity and

cannibalistic paranoia. Damaged by his childhood and abnormally cold in temperament, he tried to be a loving father and husband yet poisoned every emotional well, this nostalgic lover of roses and mimosas who believed the solution to every human problem was death, and who was obsessed with executions. This atheist owed everything to priests and saw the world in terms of sin and repentance, yet he was a 'convinced Marxist fanatic from his youth'. His fanaticism was 'semi-Islamic', his Messianic egotism boundless. He assumed the imperial mission of the Russians yet remained very much a Georgian, bringing the vendettas of his forefathers northwards to Muscovy.

Most public men share the Caesarian habit of detaching themselves to admire their own figures on the world stage, but Stalin's detachment was a degree greater. His adopted son Artyom Sergeev remembers Stalin shouting at his son Vasily for exploiting his father's name. 'But I'm a Stalin too,' said Vasily.

'No, you're not,' replied Stalin. 'You're not Stalin and I'm not Stalin. Stalin ıs Soviet power. Stalin is what he is in the newspapers and the portraits, not you, no not even me!'

He was a self-creation. A man who invents his name, birthday, nationality, education and his entire past, in order to change history and play the role of leader, is likely to end up in a mental institution, unless he embraces, by will, luck and skill, the movement and the moment that can overturn the natural order of things. Stalin was such a man. The movement was the Bolshevik Party; his moment, the decay of the Russian monarchy. After Stalin's death, it was fashionable to regard him as an aberration but this was to rewrite history as crudely as Stalin did himself. Stalin's success was not an accident. No one alive was more suited to the conspiratorial intrigues, theoretical runes, murderous dogmatism and inhuman sternness of Lenin's Party. It is hard to find a better synthesis between a man and a movement than the ideal marriage between Stalin and Bolshevism: he was a mirror of its virtues and faults.[3]

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Nadya was excited because she was dressing up. Only the day before at the Revolution Day parade, her headaches had been agonizing but today she was cheerful. Just as the real Stalin was different from his historical persona, so was the real Nadezhda Alliluyeva. 'She was very beautiful but you can't see it in photographs,' recalls Artyom Sergeev. She was not conventionally pretty. When she smiled, her eyes radiated honesty and sincerity but she was also po-faced, aloof and troubled by mental and physical illnesses. Her coldness was periodically shattered by attacks of hysteria and depression. She was chronically jealous. Unlike Stalin, who had a hangman's wit, no one recalls Nadya's sense of humour. She was a Bolshevik, quite capable of acting as Stalin's snitch, denouncing enemies to him. So was this the marriage of an ogre and a

lamb, a metaphor for Stalin's treatment of Russia itself? Only in so much as it was a Bolshevik marriage in every sense, typical of the peculiar culture that spawned it. Yet in another way, this is simply the commonplace tragedy of a callous workaholic who could not have been a worse partner for his self-centred and unbalanced wife.

Stalin's life appeared to be a perfect fusion of Bolshevik politics and family. Despite the brutal war on the peasants and the increasing pressure on the leaders, this time was a happy idyll, a life of country weekends at peaceful dachas, cheerful dinners in the Kremlin, and languid warm holidays on the Black Sea that Stalin's children would remember as the happiest of their lives. Stalin's letters reveal a difficult but loving marriage:

'Hello, Tatka … I miss you so much Tatochka – I'm as lonely as a horned owl,' Stalin wrote to Nadya, using his affectionate nickname for her, on 21 June, 1930. 'I'm not going out of town on business. I'm just finishing up my work and then I'm going out of town to the children tomorrow … So goodbye, don't be too long, come home sooner! My kisses! Your Joseph.'[4] Nadya was away taking treatment for her headaches in Carlsbad, Germany. Stalin missed her and was keeping an eye on the children, like any other husband. On another occasion, she finished her letter:

'I ask you so much to look after yourself! I am kissing you passionately just as you kissed me when we were saying goodbye! Your Nadya.'

It was never an easy relationship. They were both passionate and thin-skinned: their rows were always dramatic. In 1926, she took the children to Leningrad, saying she was leaving him. But he begged her to return and she did. One feels these sorts of rows were frequent but there were intervals of a kind of happiness, though cosiness was too much to hope for in such a Bolshevik household. Stalin was often aggressive and insulting but it was probably his detachment that made him hardest to live with. Nadya was proud and severe but always ailing. If his comrades like Molotov and Kaganovich thought her on the verge of 'madness', her own family admit that she was 'sometimes crazed and oversensitive, all the Alliluyevs had unstable Gypsy blood.' The couple were similarly impossible. Both were selfish, cold with fiery tempers though she had none of his cruelty and duplicity. Perhaps they were too similar to be happy. All the witnesses agree that life with Stalin was 'not easy – it was a hard life.' It was 'not a perfect marriage', Polina Molotova told the Stalins' daughter Svetlana, 'but then what marriage is?'

After 1929, they were often apart since Stalin holidayed in the south during the autumn when Nadya was still studying. Yet the happy times were warm and loving: their letters fly back and forth with secret-police couriers and the notes follow each other in such quick succession that they resemble emails. Even among these ascetic Bolsheviks, there were

hints of sex: the 'very passionate kisses' she recalled in her letter quoted above. They loved each other's company: as we have seen, he missed her bitterly when she was away and she missed him too. 'It's very boring without you,' she wrote. 'Come up here and it'll be nice together.'[7]

They shared Vasily and Svetlana. 'Write anything about the children,' wrote Stalin from the Black Sea. When she was away, he reported: 'The children are good. I don't like the teacher, she's running round the place and she lets Vasya and Tolika [their adopted son, Artyom] rush around morning till night. I'm sure Vaska's studies will fail and I want them to succeed in German.' She often enclosed Svetlana's childish notes.[8] They shared their health worries like any couple. When Stalin was taking the cure at the Matsesta Baths near Sochi, he reported to her: 'I've had two baths and I will have ten … I think we'll be seriously better.'

'How's your health?' she inquired.

'Had an echo on my lungs and a cough,' he replied. His teeth were a perennial problem:

'Your teeth – please have them treated,' she told him. When she took a cure in Carlsbad, he asked caringly: 'Did you visit the doctors – write their opinions!' He missed her but if the treatment took longer, he understood.[9]

Stalin did not like changing his clothes and wore summer suits into winter so she always worried about him: 'I send you a greatcoat because after the south, you might get a cold.'[10] He sent her presents too: 'I'm sending you some lemons,' he wrote proudly. 'You'll like them.' This keen gardener was to enjoy growing lemons until his death.[11]

They gossiped about the friends and comrades they saw: 'I heard Gorky [the famous novelist] came to Sochi,' she wrote. 'Maybe he's visiting you – what a pity without me. He's so charming to listen to …'[12] And of course, as a Bolshevik handmaiden living in that minuscule wider family of magnates and their wives, she was almost as obsessed about politics as he was, passing on what Molotov or Voroshilov told her.[13] She sent him books and he thanked her but grumbled when one was missing. She teased him about his appearances in White émigré literature.

The austerely modest Nadya was not afraid of giving orders herself. She scolded her husband's saturnine *chef de cabinet* Poskrebyshev while on holiday, complaining that 'we didn't receive any new foreign literature. But they say there are some new ones. Maybe you will talk to Yagoda [Deputy GPU boss] … Last time we received such uninteresting books …'[14] When she returned from the vacation, she sent Stalin the photographs: 'Only the good ones – doesn't Molotov look funny?' He later teased the absurdly stolid Molotov in front of Churchill and Roosevelt. He sent her back his own holiday photographs.

However by the late twenties, Nadya was professionally discontented. She wanted to be a serious Bolshevik career woman in her own right. In

the early twenties, she had done typing for her husband, then Lenin and then for Sergo Ordzhonikidze, another energetic and passionate Georgian dynamo now responsible for Heavy Industry. Then she moved to the International Agrarian Institute in the Department of Agitation and Propaganda where, lost in the archives, we find the daily work of Stalin's wife in all its Bolshevik dreariness: her boss asks his ordinary assistant, who signs herself 'N. Alliluyeva', to arrange the publication of a shockingly tedious article entitled 'We Must Study the Youth Movement in the Village'.

'I have absolutely nothing to do with anyone in Moscow,' she grumbled. 'It's strange though I feel closer to non-Party people – women of course. The reason is they're more easy going … There are a terrible lot of new prejudices. If you don't work, you're just a *baba*!'* She was right. The new Bolshevik women such as Polina Molotova were politicians in their own right. These feminists scorned housewives and typists like Nadya. But Stalin did not want such a wife for himself: his Nadya would be what he called a '*baba*'.[16] In 1929, Nadya decided to become a powerful Party woman in her own right and did not go on holiday with her husband but remained in Moscow for her examinations to enter the Industrial Academy to study synthetic fibres, hence her loving correspondence with Stalin. Education was one of the great Bolshevik achievements and there were millions like her. Stalin really wanted a *baba* but he supported her enterprise: ironically, his instincts may have been right because it became clear that she was really not strong enough to be a student, mother and Stalin's wife simultaneously. He often signed off:

'How are the exams? Kiss my Tatka!' Molotov's wife became a People's Commissar – and there was every reason for Nadya to hope she would do the same.[17]

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Across the Kremlin, the magnates and their wives converged on Voroshilov's apartment, oblivious of the tragedy about to befall Stalin and Nadya. None of them had far to come. Ever since Lenin had moved the capital to Moscow in 1918, the leaders had lived in this isolated secret world, behind walls thirteen feet thick, crenellated burgundy battlements and towering fortified gates, which, more than anything, resembled a 64-acre theme park of the history of old Muscovy. 'Here Ivan the Terrible used to walk,' Stalin told visitors. He daily passed the Archangel Cathedral where Ivan the Terrible lay buried, the Ivan the Great Tower, and the Yellow Palace, where he worked, had been built for Catherine the Great: by 1932, Stalin had lived fourteen years in the Kremlin, as long as he had in his parental home.

* She certainly cared for Stalin like a good *baba*: 'Stalin has to have a chicken diet,' she wrote to President Kalinin in 1921. 'We've only been allocated 15 chickens … Please raise the quota since it's only halfway through the month and we've only got 5 left …'

These potentates – the 'responsible workers' in Bolshevik terminology – and their staff, the 'service workers', lived in high-ceilinged, roomy apartments once occupied by Tsarist governors and major-domos, mainly in the Poteshny* or Horse Guards, existing so closely in these spired and domed courtyards that they resembled dons living in an Oxford college: Stalin was always popping into their homes and the other leaders regularly turned up at his place for a chat, almost to borrow the proverbial cup of sugar.

Most of the guests only needed to walk along the corridor to get to the second floor apartment of Kliment Voroshilov and his wife Ekaterina in the Horse Guards (nominally the Red Guards Building but no one called it that). Their home was reached through a door in the archway that contained the little cinema where Stalin and his friends often decamped after dinner. Inside it was cosy but spacious, with dark wood-panelled rooms looking out over the Kremlin walls into the city. Voroshilov, their host, aged fifty-two, was the most popular hero in the Bolshevik pantheon – a genial and swaggering cavalryman, once a lathe turner, with an elegant, almost d'Artagnanish moustache, fair hair and cherubic rosy-cheeked face. Stalin would have arrived with the priggish Molotov and the debauched Kuibyshev. Molotov's wife, the dark and formidable Polina, always finely dressed, came from her own flat in the same building. Nadya crossed the lane from the Poteshny with her sister Anna.

In 1932, there would have been no shortage of food and drink but these were the days before Stalin's dinners became imperial banquets. The food – Russian *hors d'oeuvres*, soup, various dishes of salted fish and maybe some lamb – was cooked in the Kremlin canteen and brought hot up to the flat where it was served by a housekeeper, and washed down with vodka and Georgian wine in a parade of toasts. Faced with unparalleled disaster in the regions where ten million people were starving, conspiracy in his Party, uncertain of the loyalty of his own entourage – and with the added strain of a troubled wife, Stalin felt beleaguered and at war. Like the others at the centre of this whirlwind, he needed to drink and unwind. Stalin sat in the middle of the table, never at the head, and Nadya sat opposite him.

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During the week, the Stalin household was based in the Kremlin apartment. The Stalins had two children, Vasily, eleven, a diminutive, stubborn and nervous boy, and Svetlana, seven, a freckly red-haired girl. Then there was Yakov, now twenty-five, son of Stalin's first marriage, who had joined his father in 1921, having been brought up in Georgia, a shy, dark boy with handsome eyes. Stalin found Yakov irritatingly slow.

* The Poteshny Palace, where the Stalins lived, means 'Amusement Palace' since it once housed actors and a theatre maintained by the Tsars.

When he was eighteen, he had fallen in love with, and married, Zoya, a priest's daughter. Stalin did not approve because he wanted Yasha to study. In a 'cry for help', Yasha shot himself but only grazed his chest. Stalin regarded this 'as blackmail'. The stern Nadya disapproved of Yasha's self-indulgence: 'she was so appalled by Yasha,' Stalin mused. But he was even less sympathetic.

'Couldn't even shoot straight,' he quipped cruelly. 'This was his military humour,' explains Svetlana. Yasha later divorced Zoya, and came home.[18]

Stalin had high, and given his own meteoric success, unfair expectations of the sons – but he adored his daughter. In addition to these three, there was Artyom Sergeev, Stalin's beloved adopted son, who was often in their house, even though his mother was still alive.* Stalin was more indulgent than Nadya, even though he smacked Vasily 'a couple of times'. Indeed, this woman portrayed as angelic in every history was, in her way, even more self-centred than Stalin. Her own family regarded her as 'utterly self-indulgent', recalls her nephew Vladimir Redens. 'The nanny complained that Nadya was not remotely interested in the children.' Her daughter Svetlana agreed that she was much more committed to her studies. She treated the children sternly and never gave Svetlana a 'word of praise'. It is surprising that she rowed most with Stalin, not about his evil policies, but about his spoiling the children!

Yet it is harsh to blame her for this. Her medical report, preserved by Stalin in his archive, and the testimonies of those who knew her, confirm that Nadya suffered from a serious mental illness, perhaps hereditary manic depression or borderline personality disorder though her daughter called it 'schizophrenia', and a disease of the skull that gave her migraines. She needed special rest cures in 1922 and 1923 as she experienced 'drowsiness and weakness'. She had had an abortion in 1926 which, her daughter revealed, had caused 'female problems'. Afterwards she had no periods for months on end. In 1927, doctors discovered her heart had a defective valve – and she suffered from exhaustion, angina and arthritis. In 1930, the angina struck again. Her tonsils had recently been taken out. The trip to Carlsbad did not cure her mysterious headaches.

She did not lack for medical care – the Bolsheviks were as obsessively hypochondriacal as they were fanatically political. Nadya was treated by the best doctors in Russia and Germany. But these were not psychiatrists:

* One of the few attractive traditions of Bolshevism was the adoption of the children of fallen heroes and ordinary orphans. Stalin adopted Artyom when his father, a famous revolutionary, was killed in 1921 and his mother was ill. Similarly Mikoyan adopted the sons of Sergei Shaumian, the hero of Baku; Voroshilov adopted the son of Mikhail Frunze, the War Commissar who died suspiciously in 1925. Later both Kaganovich and Yezhov, harsh men indeed, adopted orphans.

it is hard to imagine a worse environment for a fragile girl than the cruel aridity of this Kremlin pressure-cooker pervaded by the martial Bolshevism that she so worshipped – and the angry thoughtlessness of Stalin whom she so revered.

She was married to a demanding egotist incapable of giving her, or probably anyone, happiness: his relentless energy seemed to suck her dry. But she was also patently the wrong person for him. She did not soothe his stress – she added to it. He admitted he was baffled by Nadya's mental crises. He simply did not possess the emotional resources to help her. Sometimes her 'schizophrenia' was so grievous, 'she was almost deranged.' The magnates, and the Alliluyevs themselves, sympathized with Stalin. Yet, despite their turbulent marriage and their strange similarity of passion and jealousy, they loved each other after their own fashion.

After all, it was Stalin for whom Nadya was dressing up. The 'black dress with rose pattern appliqué …' had been bought as a present for her by her brother, slim brown-eyed Pavel Alliluyev who had just returned with his usual treasure chest of gifts from Berlin, where he worked for the Red Army. With Nadya's proud Gypsy, Georgian, Russian and German blood, the rose looked striking against her jet-black hair. Stalin would be surprised because, as her nephew put it, he 'never encouraged her to dress more glamorously'.[20]

* * *

The drinking at dinner was heavy, regulated by a *tamada* (Georgian toastmaster). This was probably one of the Georgians such as the flamboyant Grigory Ordzhonikidze, always known as Sergo, who resembled 'a Georgian prince' with his mane of long hair and leonine face. Some time during the evening, without any of the other revellers noticing, Stalin and Nadya became angry with one another. This was hardly a rare occurrence. Her evening began to crumble when, among all the toasts, dancing and flirting at table, Stalin barely noticed how she had dressed up, even though she was one of the youngest women present. This was certainly ill-mannered but not uncommon in many marriages.

They were surrounded by the other Bolshevik magnates, all hardened by years in the underground, blood-spattered by their exploits in the Civil War, and now exultant if battered by the industrial triumphs and rural struggles of the Stalin Revolution. Some, like Stalin, were in their fifties. But most were strapping, energetic fanatics in their late thirties, some of the most dynamic administrators the world has ever seen, capable of building towns and factories against all odds, but also of slaughtering their enemies and waging war on their own peasants. In their tunics and boots, they were macho, hard-drinking, powerful and famous across the Imperium, stars with blazing egos, colossal responsibilities, and Mausers in their holsters. The boisterous, booming and handsome Jewish cobbler, Lazar Kaganovich, Stalin's Deputy, had just

returned from presiding over mass-executions and deportations in the North Caucasus. Then there was the swaggering Cossack commander Budyonny with his luxuriant walrus moustaches and the dazzling white teeth, and the slim, shrewd and dapper Armenian Mikoyan, all veterans of brutal expeditions to raise grain and crush the peasants. These were voluble, violent and colourful political showmen.

They were an incestuous family, a web of long friendships and enduring hatreds, shared love affairs, Siberian exiles and Civil War exploits: Mikhail Kalinin, the President, had been visiting the Alliluyevs since 1900. Nadya knew Voroshilov's wife from Tsaritsyn (later Stalingrad) and she studied at the Industrial Academy with Maria Kaganovich and Dora Khazan (wife of another magnate, Andreyev, also present), her best friends along with Polina Molotova. Finally there was the small intellectual Nikolai Bukharin, all twinkling eyes and reddish beard, a painter, poet and philosopher whom Lenin had once called the 'darling of the Party' and who had been Stalin and Nadya's closest friend. He was a charmer, the Puck of the Bolsheviks. Stalin had defeated him in 1929 but he remained friends with Nadya. Stalin himself half-loved and half-hated 'Bukharchik' in that deadly combination of admiration and envy that was habitual to him. That night, Bukharin was readmitted, at least temporarily, to the magic circle.

Irritated by Stalin's lack of attention, Nadya started dancing with her louche, sandy-haired Georgian godfather, 'Uncle Abel' Yenukidze, the official in charge of the Kremlin who was already shocking the Party with his affairs with teenage ballerinas. 'Uncle Abel's' fate would illustrate the deadly snares of hedonism when private life belonged to the Party. Perhaps Nadya was trying to make Stalin angry. Natalya Rykova, who was in the Kremlin that night with her father, the former Premier, but not at the dinner, heard the next day that Nadya's dancing infuriated Stalin. The story is certainly credible because other accounts mention her flirting with someone. Perhaps Stalin was so drunk, he did not even notice.

* * *

Stalin was busy with his own flirtation. Even though Nadya was opposite him, he flirted shamelessly with the 'beautiful' wife of Alexander Yegorov, a Red Army commander with whom he had served in the Polish War of 1920. Galya Yegorova, née Zekrovskaya, thirty-four, was a brash film actress, a 'pretty, interesting and charming' brunette well known for her affairs and risqué dresses. Among those drab Bolshevik matrons, Yegorova must have been like a peacock in a farmyard for, as she herself admitted in her later interrogation, she moved in a world of 'dazzling company, stylish clothes … flirtatiousness, dancing and fun'. Stalin's style of flirting alternated between traditional Georgian chivalry and, when drunk, puerile boorishness. On this occasion, the latter

triumphed. Stalin always entertained children by throwing biscuits, orange peel and bits of bread into plates of ice-cream or cups of tea. He flirted with the actress in the same way, lobbing breadballs at her. His courtship of Yegorova made Nadya manically jealous: she could not tolerate it.

Stalin was no womanizer: he was married to Bolshevism and emotionally committed to his own drama in the cause of Revolution. Any private emotions were bagatelles compared to the betterment of mankind through Marxism-Leninism. But even if they were low on his list of priorities, even if he was emotionally damaged, he was not uninterested in women – and women were definitely interested in him, even 'enamoured' according to Molotov. One of his entourage later said that Stalin complained that the Alliluyev women 'would not leave him alone' because 'they all wanted to go to bed with him.' There was some truth in this.

Whether they were the wives of comrades, relations or servants, women buzzed around him like amorous bees. His newly-opened archives reveal how he was bombarded with fan letters not unlike those received by modern pop stars. 'Dear Comrade Stalin … I saw you in my dreams … I have hopes of an audience …' writes a provincial teacher, adding hopefully like a starry-eyed groupie: 'I enclose my photograph …' Stalin replied playfully if negatively:

'Comrade Unfamiliar! I ask you to trust that I have no wish to disappoint you and I'm ready to respect your letter but I have to say I have no appointment (no time!) to satisfy your wish. I wish you all the best. J Stalin. PS Your letter and photograph returned.' But sometimes he must have told Poskrebyshev that he would be happy to meet his admirers. This gels with the story of Ekaterina Mikulina, an attractive, ambitious girl of twenty-three who wrote a treatise, 'Socialist Competition of Working People', which she sent to Stalin, admitting it was full of mistakes and asking for his help. He invited her to visit him on 10 May 1929. He liked her and it was said she stayed the night at the dacha in Nadya's absence.* She received no benefits from this short liaison other than the honour of his writing her preface.

Certainly, Nadya, who knew him best, suspected him of having affairs and she had every reason to know. His bodyguard Vlasik confirmed to his daughter that Stalin was so besieged with offers that he could not resist everyone: 'he was a man after all,' behaving with the seigneurial sensuality of a traditional Georgian husband. Nadya's jealousy was sometimes manic, sometimes indulgent: in her letters, she lovingly teased him about his female admirers as if she was proud of being married to

* She later became director of a gramophone factory from which she was sacked many years later for taking bribes. She lived until 1998 but never spoke about her short friendship with Stalin.

such a great man. But at the theatre, she had recently ruined the evening by throwing a tantrum when he flirted with a ballerina. Most recently, there was the female hairdresser in the Kremlin with whom Stalin was evidently conducting some sort of dalliance. If he had merely visited the barber's shop like the other leaders, this anonymous girl would not have become such an issue. Yet Molotov remembered the hairdresser fifty years later.

Stalin had had his share of affairs within the Party. His relationships were as short as his spells in exile. Most of the girlfriends were fellow revolutionaries or their wives. Molotov was impressed by Stalin's 'success' with women: when, just before the Revolution, Stalin stole a girlfriend named Marusya from Molotov, the latter put it down to his 'beautiful dark brown eyes', though luring a girlfriend away from this plodder hardly qualifies Stalin as a Casanova. Kaganovich confirmed that Stalin enjoyed affairs with several comrades including the 'plump, pretty' Ludmilla Stal.* One source mentions an earlier affair with Nadya's friend Dora Khazan. Stalin may have benefited from revolutionary sexual freedom, even in his diffident way, enjoying some success with the girls who worked on the Central Committee secretariat, but he remained a traditional Caucasian. He favoured liaisons with discreet GPU staff: the hairdresser fitted the bill.

As so often with jealousy, Nadya's manic tantrums and bouts of depression encouraged the very thing she dreaded. All of these things – her illness, disappointment about her dress, politics, jealousy and Stalin's oafishness – came together that night.[21]

* * *

Stalin was unbearably rude to Nadya but historians, in their determination to show his monstrosity, have ignored how unbearably rude she was to him. This 'peppery woman', as Stalin's security chief, Pauker, described her, frequently shouted at Stalin in public which was why her own mother thought her a 'fool'. The cavalryman Budyonny, who was at the dinner, remembered how she was 'always nagging and humiliating' Stalin. 'I don't know how he puts up with it,' Budyonny confided in his wife. By now her depression had become so bad that she confided in a friend that she was sick of 'everything, even the children'.

The lack of interest of a mother in her own children is a flashing danger signal if ever there was one, but there was no one to act on it. Stalin was not the only one puzzled by her. Few of this rough-hewn circle, including Party women like Polina Molotova, understood that

* Another of his sweethearts was a young Party activist, Tatiana Slavotinstaya: the warmth of his love-letters from exile increased in proportion to his material needs: 'Dearest darling Tatiana Alexandrovna,' he wrote in December 1913, 'I received your parcel but you really didn't need to buy new undergarments … I don't know how to repay you; my darling sweetheart!'

Nadya was probably suffering from clinical depression: 'she couldn't control herself,' said Molotov. She desperately needed sympathy. Polina Molotova admitted the *Vozhd* was 'rough' with Nadya. Their roller-coaster continued. One moment, she was leaving Stalin, the next they loved each other again.

At the dinner, some accounts claim, it was a political toast that inflamed her. Stalin toasted the destruction of the Enemies of the State and noticed Nadya had not raised her glass.

'Why aren't you drinking?' he called over truculently, aware that she and Bukharin shared a disapproval of his starvation of the peasantry. She ignored him. To get her attention, Stalin tossed orange peel and flicked cigarettes at her, but this outraged her. When she became angrier and angrier, he called over, 'Hey you! Have a drink!'

'My name isn't "hey"!' she retorted. Furiously rising from the table, she stormed out. It was probably now that Budyonny heard her shout at Stalin: 'Shut up! Shut up!'

Stalin shook his head in the ensuing silence:

'What a fool!' he muttered, boozily not understanding how upset she was. Budyonny must have been one of the many there who sympathized with Stalin.

'I wouldn't let my wife talk to me like that!' declared the Cossack bravo who may not have been the best adviser since his own first wife had committed suicide or at least died accidentally while playing with his pistol.[22]

Someone had to follow her out. She was the leader's wife so the deputy leader's wife had to look after her. Polina Molotova pulled on her coat and followed Nadya outside. They walked round and round the Kremlin, as others were to do in times of crisis. Nadya complained to Polina,

'He grumbles all the time … and why did he have to flirt like that?' She talked about the 'business with the hairdresser' and Yegorova at the dinner. The women decided, as women do, that he was drunk, playing the fool. But Polina, devoted to the Party, also criticized her friend, saying 'it was wrong of her to abandon Stalin at such a difficult time.' Perhaps Polina's '*Partiinost*' – Partymindedness – made Nadya feel even more isolated.

'She quietened down,' recalled Polina, 'and talked about the Academy and her chances of starting work … When she seemed perfectly calm', in the early hours, they said goodnight. She left Nadya at the Poteshny Palace and crossed the lane, home to the Horse Guards.

Nadya went to her room, dropping the tea rose from her hair at the door. The dining room, with a special table for Stalin's array of government telephones, was the main room there. Two halls led off it. To the right was Stalin's office and small bedroom where he slept either on a

military cot or a divan, the habits of an itinerant revolutionary. Stalin's late hours and Nadya's strict attendance at the Academy meant they had separate rooms. Carolina Til, the housekeeper, the nannies and the servants were further down this corridor. The left corridor led to Nadya's tiny bedroom where the bed was draped in her favourite shawls. The windows opened on to the fragrant roses of the Alexandrovsky Gardens.

* * *

Stalin's movements in the next two hours are a mystery: did he return home? The party continued *chez* Voroshilov. But the bodyguard Vlasik told Khrushchev (who was not at the dinner) that Stalin left for a rendezvous at his Zubalovo dacha with a woman named Guseva, the wife of an officer, described by Mikoyan, who appreciated feminine aesthetics, as 'very beautiful'. Some of these country houses were just fifteen minutes' drive from the Kremlin. If he did go, it is possible he took some boon companions with him when the women went to bed. Voroshilov's wife was famously jealous of her husband. Molotov and President Kalinin, an old roué, were mentioned afterwards to Bukharin by Stalin himself. Certainly Vlasik would have gone with Stalin in the car. When Stalin did not come home, Nadya is said to have called the dacha.

'Is Stalin there?'

'Yes,' replied an 'inexperienced fool' of a security guard.

'Who's with him?'

'Gusev's wife.'

This version may explain Nadya's sudden desperation. However, a resurgence of her migraine, a wave of depression or just the sepulchral solitude of Stalin's grim apartment in the early hours, are also feasible. There are holes in the story too: Molotov, the nanny, and Stalin's granddaughter, among others, insisted that Stalin slept at home in the apartment. Stalin certainly would not have entertained women in his Zubalovo dacha because we know his children were there. But there were plenty of other dachas. More importantly, no one has managed to identify this Guseva, though there were several army officers of that name. Moreover Mikoyan never mentioned this to his children or in his own memoirs. Prim Molotov may have been protecting Stalin in his conversations in old age – he lied about many other matters, as did Khrushchev, dictating his reminiscences in his dotage. It seems more likely that if this woman was the 'beautiful' wife of a soldier, it was Yegorova who was actually at the party and whose flirting caused the row in the first place.

We will never know the truth but there is no contradiction between these accounts: Stalin probably did go drinking at a dacha with some fellow carousers, maybe Yegorova, and he certainly returned to the apartment in the early hours. The fates of these magnates and their women would soon depend on their relationship with Stalin. Many of

them would die terrible deaths within five years. Stalin never forgot the part they each played that November night.

* * *

Nadya looked at one of the many presents that her genial brother Pavel had brought back from Berlin along with the black embroidered dress she was still wearing. This was a present she had requested because, as she told her brother, 'sometimes it's so scary and lonely in the Kremlin with just one soldier on duty.' It was an exquisite lady's pistol in an elegant leather holster. This is always described as a Walther but in fact it was a Mauser. It is little known that Pavel also brought an identical pistol as a present for Polina Molotova but pistols were not hard to come by in that circle.

Whenever Stalin came home, he did not check his wife but simply went to bed in his own bedroom on the other side of the apartment.

Some say Nadya bolted the bedroom door. She began to write a letter to Stalin, 'a terrible letter', thought her daughter Svetlana. In the small hours, somewhere between 2 and 3 a.m. when she had finished it, she lay on the bed.

* * *

The household rose as normal. Stalin always lay in until about eleven. No one knew when he had come home and whether he had encountered Nadya. It was late when Carolina Til tried Nadya's door and perhaps forced it open. 'Shaking with fright', she found her mistress's body on the floor by the bed in a pool of blood. The pistol was beside her. She was already cold. The housekeeper rushed to get the nanny. They returned and laid the body on the bed before debating what to do. Why did they not waken Stalin? 'Little people' have a very reasonable aversion to breaking bad news to their Tsars. 'Faint with fear', they telephoned the security boss Pauker, then 'Uncle' Abel Yenukidze, Nadya's last dancing partner, the politician in charge of the Kremlin, and Polina Molotova, the last person to see her alive. Yenukidze, who lived in Horse Guards like the others, arrived first – he alone of the leaders viewed the pristine scene, a knowledge for which he would pay dearly. Molotov and Voroshilov arrived minutes later.

One can only imagine the frantic uproar in the apartment as the oblivious ruler of Russia slept off his drink down one corridor while his wife slept eternally down the other. They also called Nadya's family – her brother Pavel, who lived across the river in the new House on the Embankment, and parents, Sergei and Olga Alliluyev. Someone called the family's personal doctor who in turn summoned the well-known Professor Kushner.

Peering at her later, this disparate group of magnates, family and servants, searching for reasons for this act of despair and betrayal, found the angry letter she left behind. No one knows what it contained – or

whether it was destroyed by Stalin or someone else. But Stalin's bodyguard, Vlasik, later revealed that something else was found in her bedroom: a copy of the damaging anti-Stalinist 'Platform', written by Riutin, an Old Bolshevik who was now under arrest. This might be significant or it might mean nothing. All the leaders then read opposition and émigré journals so perhaps Nadya was reading Stalin's copy. In her letters to Stalin, she reported what she had read in the White press 'about YOU! Are you interested?' None the less, during those days in the country at large, the mere possession of this document warranted arrest.

No one knew what to do. They gathered in the dining room, whispering: should they wake up Stalin? Who would tell the *Vozhd'*? How had she died? Suddenly Stalin himself walked into the room. Someone, most likely it was Yenukidze, Stalin's old friend who judging by the archives had assumed responsibility, stepped forward and said:

'Joseph, Nadezhda Sergeevna is no longer with us. Joseph, Joseph, Nadya's dead.'[24]

Stalin was poleaxed. This supremely political creature, with an inhuman disregard for the millions of starving women and children in his own country, displayed more humanity in the next few days than he would at any other time in his life. Olga, Nadya's mother, an elegant lady of independent spirit who had known Stalin so long and always regretted her daughter's behaviour, hurried into the dining room where a broken Stalin was still absorbing the news. Doctors had arrived and they offered the heartbroken mother some valerian drops, the valium of the thirties, but she could not drink them. Stalin staggered towards her:

'I'll drink them,' he said. He downed the whole dose. He saw the body and the letter which, wrote Svetlana, shocked and wounded him grievously.

Nadya's brother, Pavel, arrived with his dimpled sunny wife Yevgenia, known to all as Zhenya, who would herself play a secret role in Stalin's life – and suffer for it. They were shocked not only by the death of a sister but by the sight of Stalin himself.

'She's crippled me,' he said. They had never seen him so soft, so vulnerable. He wept, saying something like this lament of many years later: 'Oh Nadya, Nadya … how we needed you, me and the children!' The rumours of murder started immediately. Had Stalin returned to the apartment and shot her in a row? Or had he insulted her again and gone to bed, leaving her to kill herself? But the tragedy raised greater questions too: until that night, the existence of the magnates was a 'wonderful life', as described by Ekaterina Voroshilova in her diary. That night, it ended for ever. 'How,' she asks, 'did our life in the Party become so complex, it was incomprehensible to the point of agony?' The 'agony' was just beginning. The suicide 'altered history,' claims the Stalins' nephew, Leonid Redens. 'It made the Terror inevitable.' Naturally Nadya's family

exaggerate the significance of her death: Stalin's vindictive, paranoid and damaged character was already formed long before. The Terror itself was the result of vast political, economic and diplomatic forces – but Stalin's personality certainly shaped it. Nadya's death created one of the rare moments of doubt in a life of iron self-belief and dogmatic certainty. How did Stalin recover and what was the effect of this humiliation on him, his entourage – and Russia itself? Did vengeance for this personal fiasco play its part in the coming Terror when some of the guests that night would liquidate the others?

Stalin suddenly picked up Nadya's pistol and weighed it in his hands: 'It was a toy,' he told Molotov, adding strangely, 'It was only fired once a year!'

The man of steel 'was in a shambles, knocked sideways', exploding in 'sporadic fits of rage', blaming anyone else, even the books she was reading, before subsiding into despair. Then he declared that he resigned from power. He too was going to kill himself:

'I can't go on living like this …'[25]

PART ONE

# That Wonderful Time: Stalin and Nadya, 1878–1932

# I

## THE GEORGIAN AND THE SCHOOLGIRL

Nadya and Stalin had been married for fourteen years but it extended deeper and longer than that, so steeped was their marriage in Bolshevism. They had shared the formative experiences of the underground life, intimacy with Lenin during the Revolution, then the Civil War. Stalin had known her family for nearly thirty years and he had first met her in 1904 when she was three. He was then twenty-five and he had been a Marxist for six years.

Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili was not born on 21 December 1879, Stalin's official birthday. 'Soso' was actually born in a tiny shack (that still exists) to Vissarion or 'Beso' and his wife Ekaterina, 'Keke', née Geladze, over a year earlier on 6 December 1878. They lived in Gori, a small town beside the Kura River in the romantic, mountainous and defiantly unRussian province of Georgia, a small country thousands of miles from the Tsar's capital: it was closer to Baghdad than St Petersburg.* Westerners often do not realize how foreign Georgia was: an independent kingdom for millennia with its own ancient language, traditions, cuisine, literature, it was only consumed by Russia in gulps between 1801 and 1878. With its sunny climate, clannish blood feuds, songs and vineyards, it resembles Sicily more than Siberia.

Soso's father was a violent, drunken semi-itinerant cobbler who savagely beat both Soso and Keke. She in turn, as the child later recalled, 'thrashed him mercilessly'. Soso once threw a dagger at his father. Stalin reminisced how Beso and Father Charkviani, the local priest, indulged in drinking bouts together to the fury of his mother: 'Father, don't make my husband a drunk, it'll destroy my family.' Keke threw out Beso. Stalin was

* This was not lost on another peasant boy who was born only a few hundred miles from Gori: Saddam Hussein. A Kurdish leader, Mahmoud Osman, who negotiated with him, observed that Saddam's study and bedroom were filled with books on Stalin. Today, Stalin's birthplace, the hut in Gori, is embraced magnificently by a white-pillared marble temple built by Lavrenti Beria and remains the centrepiece of Stalin Boulevard, close to the Stalin Museum.

proud of her 'strong willpower'. When Beso later forcibly took Soso to work as a cobbling apprentice in Tiflis, Keke's priests helped get him back.

She took in washing for local merchants. Stalin's mother was pious and became close to the priests who protected her. But she was also earthy and spicy: she may have made the sort of compromises that are tempting for a penniless single mother, becoming the mistress of her employers. This inspired the legends that often embroider the paternity of famous men. It is possible that Stalin was the child of his godfather, an affluent innkeeper, officer and amateur wrestler named Koba Egnatashvili. Afterwards, Stalin protected Egnatashvili's two sons who remained friends until his death and reminisced in old age about Egnatashvili's wrestling prowess. None the less, one sometimes has to admit that great men are the children of their own fathers. Stalin was said to resemble Beso uncannily. Yet he himself once asserted that his father was a priest.

Stalin was born with the second and third toes of his left foot joined. He suffered a pock-marked face from an attack of smallpox and later damaged his left arm, possibly in a carriage accident. He grew up into a sallow, stocky, surly youth with speckled honey-coloured eyes and thick black hair – a *kinto*, Georgian street urchin. He was exceptionally intelligent with an ambitious mother who wanted him to be a priest, perhaps like his real father. Stalin later boasted that he learned to read at five by listening to Father Charkviani teaching the alphabet. The five-year-old then helped Charkviani's thirteen-year-old daughter with her reading.

In 1888, he entered the Gori Church School and then, triumphantly, in 1894, won a 'five rouble scholarship' to the Tiflis Seminary in the Georgian capital. As Stalin later told a confidant, 'My father found out that along with the scholarship, I also earned money (five roubles a month) as a choirboy … and once I went out and saw him standing there:

' "Young man, sir," said Beso, "you've forgotten your father … Give me at least three roubles, don't be as mean as your mother!"

' "Don't shout!" replied Soso. "If you don't leave immediately, I'll call the watchman!" ' Beso slunk away.* He apparently died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1909.

Stalin sometimes sent money to help his mother but henceforth kept his distance from Keke whose dry wit and rough discipline resembled his own. There has been too much cod-psychology about Stalin's childhood but this much is certain: raised in a poor priest-ridden household, he was

* I am grateful to Gela Charkviani for sharing with me the unpublished but fascinating manuscript of the memoirs of his father, Candide Charkviani, First Secretary of the Georgian Party, 1938–51. In old age, Stalin spent hours telling Charkviani about his childhood. Charkviani writes that he tried to find Beso's grave in the Tiflis cemetery but could not. He found photographs meant to show Beso and asked Stalin to identify him but he stated that these did not show his father. It is therefore unlikely that the usual photograph said to show Beso is correct. On Stalin's paternity, the Egnatashvili family emphatically deny that the innkeeper was Stalin's father.

damaged by violence, insecurity and suspicion but inspired by the local traditions of religious dogmatism, blood-feuding and romantic brigandry. 'Stalin did not like to speak about his parents and childhood' but it is meaningless to over-analyse his psychology. He was emotionally stunted and lacked empathy yet his antennae were supersensitive. He was abnormal but Stalin himself understood that politicians are rarely normal: History, he wrote later, is full of 'abnormal people'.

* * *

The seminary provided his only formal education. This boarding school's catechismic teaching and 'Jesuitical methods' of 'surveillance, spying, invasion of the inner life, the violation of people's feelings' repelled, but impressed, Soso so acutely that he spent the rest of his life refining their style and methods. It stimulated this autodidact's passion for reading but he became an atheist in the first year. 'I got some friends,' he said, 'and a bitter debate started between the believers and us!' He soon embraced Marxism.

In 1899, he was expelled from the seminary, joined the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party and became a professional revolutionary, adopting the *nom de revolution*, Koba, inspired by the hero of a novel, *The Parricide*, by Alexander Kazbegi, a dashing, vindictive Caucasian outlaw. He combined the 'science' of Marxism with his soaring imagination: he wrote romantic poetry, published in Georgian, before working as a weatherman at the Tiflis Meteorological Institute, the only job he held before becoming one of the rulers of Russia in 1917.

'Koba' was convinced by the universal panacea of Marxism, 'a philosophical system' that suited the obsessive totality of his character. The class struggle also matched his own melodramatic pugnacity. The paranoid secrecy of the intolerant and idiosyncratic Bolshevik culture dovetailed with Koba's own self-contained confidence and talent for intrigue. Koba plunged into the underworld of revolutionary politics that was a seething, stimulating mixture of conspiratorial intrigue, ideological nitpicking, scholarly education, factional games, love affairs with other revolutionaries, police infiltration and organizational chaos. These revolutionaries hailed from every background – Russians, Armenians, Georgians and Jews, workers, noblemen, intellectuals and daredevils – and organized strikes, printing presses, meetings and heists. United in the obsessional study of Marxist literature, there was always a division between the educated bourgeois émigrés, like Lenin himself, and the rough men of action in Russia itself. The underground life, always itinerant and dangerous, was the formative experience not only of Stalin but of all his comrades. This explains much that happens later.[1]

In 1902, Koba won the spurs of his first arrest and Siberian exile, the first of seven such exiles from which he escaped six times. These exiles were far from Stalin's brutal concentration camps: the Tsars were inept policemen.

They were almost reading holidays in distant Siberian villages with one part-time gendarme on duty, during which revolutionaries got to know (and hate) each other, corresponded with their comrades in Petersburg or Vienna, discussed abstruse questions of dialectical materialism, and had affairs with local girls. When the call of freedom or revolution became urgent, they escaped, yomping across the *taiga* to the nearest train. In exile, Koba's teeth, a lifelong source of pain, began to deteriorate.

Koba avidly supported Vladimir Lenin and his seminal work, *What Is To Be Done?* This domineering political genius combined the Machiavellian practicality of seizing power, with mastery of Marxist ideology. Exploiting the schism that would lead to the creation of his own Bolshevik Party, Lenin's message was that a supreme Party of professional revolutionaries could seize power for the workers and then rule in their name in a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' until this was no longer necessary because socialism had been achieved. Lenin's vision of the Party as 'the advance detachment' of the 'army of proletarians … a fighting group of leaders' set the militarist tone of Bolshevism.[2]

In 1904, on Koba's return to Tiflis, he met his future father-in-law Sergei Alliluyev, twelve years his senior, a skilled Russian electrical artisan married to Olga Fedorenko, a strong-willed Georgian-German-Gypsy beauty with a taste for love affairs with revolutionaries, Poles, Hungarians, even Turks. It was whispered that Olga had an affair with the young Stalin who fathered his future wife, Nadya. This is false since Nadezhda was already three when her parents first met Koba, but his affair with Olga is entirely credible and he himself may have hinted at it. Olga, who, according to her granddaughter Svetlana, had a 'weakness for southern men', saying 'Russian men are boors,' always had a 'soft spot' for Stalin. Her marriage was difficult. Family legend has Nadya's elder brother Pavel seeing his mother making up to Koba. Such short liaisons were everyday occurrences among revolutionaries.

Long before they fell in love, Stalin and Nadya were part of the Bolshevik family who passed through the Alliluyev household: Kalinin and Yenukidze among others at that dinner in 1932. There was another special link: soon afterwards Koba met the Alliluyevs in Baku, and saved Nadya from drowning in the Caspian Sea, a romantic bond if ever there was one.[3]

* * *

Koba meanwhile married another sprig of a Bolshevik family. Ekaterina, 'Kato', a placid, darkly pretty Georgian daughter of a cultured family, was the sister of Alexander Svanidze, also a Bolshevik graduate of Tiflis seminary who joined Stalin's Kremlin entourage. Living in a hut near the Baku oilfields, Kato gave him a son, Yakov. But Koba's appearances at home were sporadic and unpredictable.

During the 1905 Revolution, in which Leon Trotsky, a Jewish journalist, bestrode the Petersburg Soviet, Koba claimed he was organizing peasant

revolts in the Kartli region of Georgia. After the Tsarist backlash, he travelled to a Bolshevik conference in Tammerfors, Finland – his first meeting with his hero, Lenin, 'that mountain eagle'. The next year, Koba travelled to the Congress in Stockholm. On his return, he lived the life of a Caucasian brigand, raising Party funds in bank robberies or 'expropriations': he boasted in old age of these 'heists … our friends grabbed 250,000 roubles in Yerevan Square!'

After visiting London for a Congress, Koba's beloved, half-ignored Kato died 'in his arms' in Tiflis of tuberculosis on 25 November 1907. Koba was heartbroken. When the little procession reached the cemetery, Koba pressed a friend's hand and said, 'This creature softened my heart of stone. She died and with her died my last warm feelings for people.' He pressed his heart: 'It's desolate here inside.' Yet he left their son Yakov to be brought up by Kato's family. After hiding in the Alliluyevs' Petersburg apartment, he was recaptured and returned to his place of banishment, Solvychegodsk. It was in this remote one-horse town in January 1910 that Koba moved into the house of a young widow named Maria Kuzakova by whom he fathered a son.*

After hiding in the Alliluyevs', soon afterwards, he was involved in a love affair with a schoolgirl of seventeen named Pelageya Onufrieva. When she went back to school, he wrote: 'Let me kiss you now. I am not simply sending a kiss but am KISSSSSING you passionately (it's not worth kissing otherwise).' The locals in the north russified 'Iosef' to 'Osip' and is letters to Pelageya were often signed by her revealing nickname: 'Oddball Osip'.[4]

* * *

After yet another escape, Koba returned to Petersburg in 1912, sharing digs with a ponderous Bolshevik who was to be the comrade most closely associated with him: Vyacheslav Scriabin, just twenty-two, had just followed the Bolshevik custom of assuming a macho *nom de revolution* and called himself that 'industrial name' Molotov – 'the hammer'. Koba had also assumed an 'industrial' alias: he first signed an article 'Stalin' in 1913. It was no coincidence that 'Stalin' sounds like 'Lenin'. He may have been using it earlier and not just for its metallic grit. Perhaps he borrowed the name from the 'buxom pretty' Bolshevik named Ludmilla Stal with whom he had had an affair.[5]

This 'wonderful Georgian', as Lenin called him, was co-opted by the Party's Central Committee at the end of the Prague conference of 1912.

* The son Konstantin Kuzakov enjoyed few privileges except that it is said that during the Purges, when he came under suspicion, he appealed to his real father who wrote 'Not to be touched' on his file – but that may be simply because he was the son of a woman who was kind to Stalin in exile. In 1995, after a successful career as a television executive, Kuzakov, in an article headed 'Son of Stalin', announced: 'I was still a child when I learned I was Stalin's son.' There was almost certainly another child from a later exile.

In November, Koba Stalin travelled from Vienna to Cracow to meet Lenin with whom he stayed: the leader supervised his keen disciple in the writing of an article expressing Bolshevik policy on the sensitive nationality question, henceforth Stalin's expertise. 'Marxism and the National Question', arguing for holding together the Russian Empire, won him ideological kudos and Lenin's trust.

'Did you write all of it?' asked Lenin (according to Stalin).

'Yes … Did I make mistakes?'

'No, on the contrary, splendid!' This was his last trip abroad until the Teheran Conference in 1943.

In February 1913, Stalin was rearrested and given a suspiciously light exile: was he an agent of the Tsar's secret police, the Okhrana? The historical sensationalism of Stalin's duplicity shows a naïve misunderstanding of underground life: the revolutionaries were riddled with Okhrana spies but many were double or triple agents.* Koba was willing to betray colleagues who opposed him – but, as the Okhrana admitted in their reports, he remained a fanatical Marxist – and that is what mattered.

Stalin's final exile began in 1913 in the distant cold north-east of Siberia, where he was nicknamed 'Pock-marked Joe' by the local peasants. Fearing more escapes, exiles were moved to Kureika, a desolate village in Turukhansk, north of the Arctic Circle where his fishing prowess convinced locals of magical powers and he took another mistress. Stalin wrote pitiful letters to Sergei and Olga Alliluyev: 'Nature in this cursed region is shamefully poor' and he begged them to send him a postcard: 'I'm crazy with longing for nature scenes if only on paper.' Yet it was also strangely a happy time, perhaps the happiest of his life for he reminisced about his exploits there until his death, particularly about the shooting expedition when he skied into the *taiga*, bagged many partridges and then almost froze to death on the way back.[6]

The military blunders and food shortages of the Great War inexorably destroyed the monarchy which, to the surprise of the Bolsheviks, collapsed suddenly in February 1917, replaced by a Provisional Government. On 12 March, Stalin reached the capital and visited the Alliluyevs: once again, Nadya, a striking brunette, sixteen, her sister Anna and brother Fyodor, questioned this returning hero about his adventures. When they accompanied him by tram towards the offices of the newspaper *Pravda*, he called out,

'Be sure to set aside a room in the new apartment for me. Don't

* The recent *Secret File of Stalin* by Roman Brackman claims the entire Terror was Stalin's attempt to wipe out anyone with knowledge of his duplicity. Yet there were many reasons for the Terror, though Stalin's character was a major cause. Stalin liquidated many of those who had known him in the early days yet he mysteriously preserved others. He also killed over a million victims who had no knowledge of his early life. However, Brackman also gives an excellent account of the intrigues and betrayals of underground life.

forget.' He found Molotov editing *Pravda*, which job he immediately commandeered for himself. While Molotov had taken a radical anti-Government line, Stalin and Lev Kamenev, né Rosenfeld, one of Lenin's closest comrades, were more conciliatory. Lenin, who arrived on 4 April, overruled Stalin's vacillations. In a rare apology to Molotov, Stalin conceded,

'You were closer to Lenin …' When Lenin needed to escape to Finland to avoid arrest, Stalin hid him *chez* Alliluyev, shaved off his beard and escorted him to safety. The sisters, Anna, who worked at Bolshevik headquarters, and Nadya waited up at night. The Georgian entertained them, mimicking politicians and reading aloud Chekhov, Pushkin or Gorky, as he would later read to his sons.[7] On 25 October 1917, Lenin launched the Bolshevik Revolution.

* * *

Stalin may have been a 'grey blur' in those days, but he was Lenin's own blur. Trotsky admitted that contact with Lenin was mainly through Stalin because he was of less interest to the police. When Lenin formed the new Government, Stalin founded his Commissariat of Nationalities with one secretary, young Fyodor Alliluyev, and one typist – Nadya.[8]

In 1918, the Bolsheviks struggled for survival. Faced with a galloping German advance, Lenin and Trotsky were forced to make the pragmatic Brest-Litovsk agreement, ceding much of Ukraine and the Baltics to the Kaiser. After Germany's collapse, British, French and Japanese troops intervened while White armies converged on the tottering regime, which moved its capital to Moscow to make it less vulnerable. Lenin's beleaguered Empire soon shrunk to the size of medieval Muscovy. In August, Lenin was wounded in an assassination attempt, avenged by the Bolsheviks in a wave of Terror. In September, Lenin, recovered, declared Russia 'a military camp'. His most ruthless troubleshooters were Trotsky, the War Commissar, creating and directing the Red Army from his armoured train, and Stalin, the only two leaders allowed access without appointment to Lenin's study. When Lenin formed an executive decision-making organ with just five members called the Political Bureau – or Politburo – both were members. The bespectacled Jewish intellectual was the hero of the Revolution, second only to Lenin himself, while Stalin seemed a rough provincial. But Trotsky's patronising grandeur offended the plain-spoken 'old illegals' of the regions who were more impressed with Stalin's hard-nosed practicality. Stalin identified Trotsky as the main obstacle to his rise.

The city of Tsaritsyn played a decisive role in Stalin's career – and his marriage. In 1918, the key strategic city on the Lower Volga, the gateway to the grain (and oil) of the North Caucasus and the southerly key to Moscow, looked as if it was likely to fall to the Whites. Lenin despatched Stalin to Tsaritsyn as Director-General of Food Supplies in south Russia.

But the latter soon managed to get his status raised to Commissar with sweeping military powers.

In an armoured train, with 400 Red Guards, Fyodor Alliluyev and his teenage typist Nadya, Stalin steamed into Tsaritsyn on 6 April to find the city beset with ineptitude and betrayal. Stalin showed he meant business by shooting any suspected counter-revolutionaries: 'a ruthless purge of the rear,' wrote Voroshilov, 'administered by an iron hand.' Lenin ordered him to be ever more 'merciless' and 'ruthless'. Stalin replied:

"Be assured our hand will not tremble.' It was here that Stalin grasped the convenience of death as the simplest and most effective political tool but he was hardly alone in this: during the Civil War, the Bolsheviks, clad in leather boots, coats and holsters, embraced a cult of the glamour of violence, a macho brutality that Stalin made his own. It was here too that Stalin met and befriended Voroshilov and Budyonny, both at that dinner on 8 November 1932, who formed the nucleus of his military and political support. When the military situation deteriorated in July, Stalin effectively took control of the army: 'I must have military powers.' This was the sort of leadership the Revolution required to survive but it was a challenge to Trotsky who had created his Red Army with the help of so-called 'military experts', ex-Tsarist officers. Stalin distrusted these useful renegades and shot them whenever possible.

He resided in the plush lounge carriage that had once belonged to a Gypsy torch singer who decorated it in light blue silk. Here Nadya and Stalin probably became lovers. She was seventeen, he was thirty-nine. It must have been a thrilling, terrifying adventure for a schoolgirl. When they arrived, Stalin used the train as his headquarters: it was from here that he ordered the constant shootings by the Cheka. This was a time when women accompanied their husbands to war: Nadya was not alone. Voroshilov and Budyonny's wives were in Tsaritsyn too.

Stalin and these swashbucklers formed a 'military opposition' against Trotsky whom he revealingly called an 'operetta commander, a chatterbox, ha-ha-ha!' When he arrested a group of Trotsky's 'specialists' and imprisoned them on a barge on the Volga, Trotsky angrily objected. The barge sank with all apparently aboard. 'Death solves all problems,' Stalin is meant to have said. 'No man, no problem.' It was the Bolshevik way.*

Lenin recalled Stalin. It did not matter that he had probably made things worse, wasted the expertise of Tsarist officers and backed a crew

* Stalin later seemed to confirm the story of the sinking barge in a fascinating letter to Voroshilov: 'The summer after the assassination attempt on Lenin we … made a list of officers whom we gathered in the Manege … to shoot en masse … So the Tsaritsyn barge was the result not of the struggle against military specialists but momentum from the centre …' Five future Second World War marshals fought at Tsaritsyn: in ascending competence – Kulik, Voroshilov, Budyonny, Timoshenko and Zhukov (though the latter fought there in 1919 after Stalin's departure).

of sabre-waving daredevils. Stalin had been ruthless – the merciless application of pressure was what Lenin wanted. But the *kinto* had glimpsed the glory of the Generalissimo. More than that, the enmity with Trotsky and the alliance with the 'Tsaritysn Group' of cavalrymen were seminal: perhaps he admired Voroshilov and Budyonny's macho devil-may-care courage, a quality he lacked. His loathing for Trotsky became one of the moving passions of his life. He married Nadya on his return, moving into a modest Kremlin flat (shared with the whole Alliluyev family) and, later, a fine dacha named Zubalovo.[9]

In May 1920, Stalin was appointed Political Commissar to the South-Western Front after the Poles had captured Kiev. The Politburo ordered the conquest of Poland to spread the Revolution westwards. The commander of the Western Front pushing on Warsaw was a brilliant young man named Mikhail Tukhachevsky. When Stalin was ordered to transfer his cavalry to Tukhachevsky, he refused until it was already too late. The vendettas reverberating from this fiasco ended in slaughter seventeen years later.[10]

In 1921, Nadya showed her Bolshevik austerity by walking to hospital where she gave birth to a son, Vasily, followed five years later by a daughter, Svetlana. Nadya meanwhile worked as a typist in Lenin's office where she was to prove very useful in the coming intrigues.

* * *

The 'vanguard' of Bolsheviks, many young and now blooded by the brutality of that struggle, found themselves a tiny, isolated and embattled minority nervously ruling a vast ruined Empire, itself besieged in a hostile world. Contemptuous of the workers and peasants, Lenin was none the less surprised to discover that neither of these classes supported them. Lenin thus proposed a single organ to rule and oversee the creation of socialism: the Party. It was this embarrassing gap between reality and aspiration that made the Party's quasi-religious fidelity to ideological purity so important, its military discipline so obligatory.

In this peculiar dilemma, they improvised a peculiar system and sought solace in a uniquely peculiar view of the world. The Party's sovereign organ was the Central Committee (CC), the top seventy or so officials, who were elected annually by Party Congresses which, later, were held ever less frequently. The CC elected the small Politburo, a super-War Cabinet that decided policy, and a Secretariat of about three Secretaries

***** Stalin was never the titular Head of State of the Soviet Union, nor was Lenin. Kalinin's title was the Chairman of the Central Executive Committee, technically the highest legislative body, but he was colloquially the 'President'. After the 1936 Constitution, his title was Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. Only with the Brezhnev Constitution did the Secretary-General of the Party add the Presidency to his titles. The Bolsheviks created a whole new jargon of acronyms in their effort to create a new sort of government. People's Commissars (*Narodny Komissar*) were known as *Narkoms*. The Council (Soviet) of Commissars was known as *Sovnarkom*.

to run the Party. They directed the conventional government of a radically centralized, vertical one-Party State: Mikhail Kalinin, born in 1875, the only real peasant in the leadership known as the 'All-Union peasant elder', became Head of State in 1919.* Lenin ran the country as Premier, the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, a cabinet of ministers which executed the Politburo's orders. There was a sort of democracy within the Politburo but after the desperate crises of the Civil War, Lenin banned factions. The Party frantically recruited millions of new members but were they trustworthy? Gradually, an authoritarian bureaucratic dictatorship took the place of the honest debates of earlier days but in 1921, Lenin, that superlative improviser, restored a degree of capitalism, a compromise called the New Economic Policy (NEP), to save the regime.

In 1922, Lenin and Kamenev engineered the appointment of Stalin as General Secretary – or *Gensec* – of the CC to run the Party. Stalin's Secretariat was the engine-room of the new state, giving him sweeping powers which he demonstrated in the 'Georgian Affair' when he and Sergo annexed Georgia, which had seceded from the Empire, and then imposed their will on the independent-minded Georgian Party. Lenin was disgusted but his stroke in December 1922 prevented him moving against Stalin. The Politburo, taking control of the health of the Party's greatest asset, banned him from working more than ten minutes a day. When Lenin tried to do more, Stalin insulted Lenin's wife Krupskaya, a tantrum that could have ended his career.*

Lenin alone could see that Stalin was emerging as his most likely successor so he secretly dictated a damning Testament demanding his dismissal. Lenin was felled by a fatal stroke on 21 January 1924. Against the wishes of Lenin and his family, Stalin orchestrated the effective deification of the leader and his embalming like an Orthodox saint in a Mausoleum on Red Square. Stalin commandeered the sacred orthodoxy of his late hero to build up his own power.

An outsider in 1924 would have expected Trotsky to succeed Lenin, but in the Bolshevik oligarchy, this glittery fame counted against the insouciant War Commissar. The hatred between Stalin and Trotsky was not only based on personality and style but also on policy. Stalin had already used the massive patronage of the Secretariat to promote his

*Stalin's row with Lenin's wife, Krupskaya, outraged Lenin's bourgeois sentiments. But Stalin thought it was entirely consistent with Party culture: 'Why should I stand on my hindlegs for her? To sleep with Lenin does not mean you understand Marxism-Leninism. Just because she used the same toilet as Lenin …' This led to some classic Stalin jokes, in which he warned Krupskaya that if she did not obey, the Central Committee would appoint someone else as Lenin's wife. That is a very Bolshevik concept. His disrespect for Krupskaya was probably not helped by her complaints about Lenin's flirtations with his assistants, including Yelena Stasova, the one whom Stalin threatened to promote to 'wife'.

allies, Molotov, Voroshilov and Sergo; he also supplied an encouraging and realistic alternative to Trotsky's insistence on European revolution: 'Socialism in One Country'. The other members of the Politburo, led by Grigory Zinoviev, and Kamenev, Lenin's closest associates, were also terrified of Trotsky, who had united all against himself. So when Lenin's Testament was unveiled in 1924, Kamenev proposed to let Stalin remain as Secretary, little realizing that there would be no other real opportunity to remove him for thirty years. Trotsky, the Revolution's preening panjandrum, was defeated with surprising ease and speed. Having dismissed Trotsky from his powerbase as War Commissar, Zinoviev and Kamenev discovered too late that their co-triumvir Stalin was the real threat.

By 1926, Stalin had defeated them too, helped by his Rightist allies, Nikolai Bukharin and Alexei Rykov, who had succeeded Lenin as Premier. Stalin and Bukharin supported the NEP. But many of the regional hardliners feared that compromise undermined Bolshevism itself, putting off the reckoning day with the hostile peasantry. In 1927, a grain crisis brought this to a head, unleashed the Bolshevik taste for extreme solutions to their problems, and set the country on a repressive martial footing that would last until Stalin's death.

In January 1928, Stalin himself travelled to Siberia to investigate the drop in grain deliveries. Replaying his glorious role as Civil War commissar, Stalin ordered the forcible gathering of grain and blamed the shortage on the so-called kulaks, who were hoarding their harvest in the hope of higher prices. Kulak usually meant a peasant who employed a couple of labourers or owned a pair of cows. 'I gave a good shaking to the Party Organs,' Stalin said later but he soon discovered that 'the Rightists didn't like harsh measures … they thought it the beginning of civil war in the villages.' On his return, Premier Rykov threatened Stalin:

'Criminal charges should be filed against you!' However the rough young commissars, the 'committee men' at the heart of the Party, supported Stalin's violent requisitioning of grain. Every winter, they headed into the hinterlands to squeeze the grain out of the kulaks who were identified as the main enemies of the revolution. However, they realized the NEP had failed. They had to find a radical, military solution to the food crisis.

Stalin was a natural radical and now he shamelessly stole the clothes of the Leftists he had just defeated. He and his allies were already talking of a final new Revolution, the 'Great Turn' leftwards to solve the problem of the peasantry and economic backwardness. These Bolsheviks hated the obstinate old world of the peasants: they had to be herded into collective farms, their grain forcibly collected and sold abroad to fund a manic gallop to create an instant industrial powerhouse that could produce tanks and planes. Private trade of food was stopped. Kulaks

were ordered to deliver their grain and prosecuted as speculators if they did not. Gradually, the villagers themselves were forced into collectives. Anyone who resisted was a kulak enemy.

Similarly, in industry, the Bolsheviks unleashed their hatred of technical experts, or 'bourgeois specialists' – actually just middle-class engineers. While they trained their own new Red élite, they intimidated those who said Stalin's industrial plans were impossible with a series of faked trials that started at the Shakhty coalmine. Nothing was impossible. The resulting rural nightmare was like a war without battles but with death on a monumental scale.[11] Yet the warlords of this struggle, Stalin's magnates and their wives, still lived in the Kremlin like a surprisingly cosy family.