­­Joseph Stalin (December 18, 1878 – March 5, 1953)

Joseph Stalin (Iusif Vassarionovich Dzhugashvili) was born in Gori, Russian Empire, which is part of present day Georgia. He adopted the name “Stalin” from the Russian word for “steel.” Although he originally attended a Georgian Orthodox seminary, he read the works of Lenin and became a Bolshevik in 1903. In the prerevolutionary period, Stalin was a leading revolutionary in the Caucasus, raising funds through bank robberies. He was sent to Siberia several times as a prisoner, but frequently escaped, the last time to Petrograd during the revolution.

He worked as editor of *Pravda*, became a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee, and helped plan the October Revolution. During the Civil War, Stalin served as the Peoples’ Commissar for Nationalities’ Affairs and the director of the Southern Front, using brutal tactics such as public executions and burning villages, often against the orders of Lenin.

After the Bolsheviks took power, Lenin appointed Stalin General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. After Lenin’s stroke in 1922, Stalin acted as Lenin’s messenger, quarreling with other Politburo members over how best to run Soviet domestic and foreign policy. He formed political alliances to oust his opponents and expelled many “Old Bolsheviks.”

As leader of the Soviet Union, Stalin rapidly modernized the Soviet economy through his Five Year Plans and forced collectivization of peasants, who violently resisted. Collectivization stunted agricultural production. Stalin blamed the kulaks, or wealthy peasants, for the deadly famine in the early 1930s, especially in the Ukraine, in which perhaps 4-12 million people died. He presided over the Great Terror, in which millions of people underwent investigation, imprisonment and sometimes execution. Many were sent to the GULAGs and completely erased from public memory. Socially, the Soviet Union retreated from its revolutionary values towards more conservative ones, often to reach economic goals: Stalin banned abortion and minimized some social welfare programs.

Leading up to World War II, Stalin entered a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. Stalin and Hitler divided Poland, but during Operation Barbarossa, Germany violated the agreement and invaded the Soviet Union. During the war, the Soviet Union became unlikely allies with the United States and Great Britain, though Stalin grew frustrated as Churchill and Roosevelt stalled opening the Western front, deepening his distrust of the two. In the final stages of the war, Stalin’s troops pushed towards Germany, liberating concentration camps and eventually taking Berlin, though at tremendous cost: the Soviet Union lost more men in battle than any other nation (including Germany)—between one-third and one-half of all deaths.

In the postwar era, following negotiations at Yalta, Stalin exerted his influence in Eastern Europe. Immediately following the war, the Western allies and the Soviet Union argued over free elections in Soviet satellite nations and US aid. Stalin also gained allies in Asia. After the surrender of Japan, the Soviet Union occupied the northern part of Korea. During the Korean War, however, Stalin gave minimal support to North Korea and instead encouraged China to help its communist neighbor. Stalin’s relationship with Israel and with Jews in the Soviet Union deteriorated towards the end of his life. The Soviet Union originally supported Israel but then accused Soviet Jews of being subversive and divided in loyalty. In 1952, Stalin revealed the Doctor’s Plot, which was a conspiracy of Jewish doctors. The proof was largely fabricated, and Stalin died before any real measures could be taken. The decision to allow Stalin’s influence in Eastern Europe and North Korea caused tension between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union. During this time period, Stalin also built the Soviet Union’s first atomic and hydrogen bombs. Because of these developments, the United States adopted a policy of containment, designed to prevent the further spread of communism. After Stalin died on March 5, 1953, his main legacy in the West was the development of the Cold War.

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