Stalin: The Early Years

Amber "Vicki" Crosson

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Joseph Dzhughashvili was brought up in a chaotic realm, filled with ideologies and principles that exhibited stark opposition. In the same way that one could draw a contrast between small, nationalistic Gori, where Joseph grew up, to the cosmopolitan, urban Tiflis where he attended seminary, one might just as easily find two sides to each of the major themes in his childhood. While many of these contrasts undoubtedly played an important role in the development of the man, Stalin, it was by no means inevitable. That is, although both sides of each duality were likely to create a troubled adult, the final result was not certain. No one could have looked at the series of events, in Joseph Dzhughashvili's early life, to determine what he would become.

The first of the major themes in Joseph's young life is that of his parental expectations. While his father, Beso, desired that his son become a cobbler, as was Beso. It was assumed that "what was good enough for him [...] was equally appropriate for his offspring" (Service p. 23). A man like Beso had grown up tough; he could stand up for himself in a brawl and got his way in fights amongst his family, often by resorting to beatings.

On the other side, there was Joseph's mother, Keke. Keke worked long days to support her family, in hopes that one day her son would have a better life than she had. As Service wrote, "Joseph was her sole hope" to break out of the "vicious circle of poverty" (p. 20). Had it been up to Keke, Joseph would have stayed in school to become a priest; he would have continued to conform to the rules of the church, where his she took solace.

Keke doted over Joseph, protecting him from troubles; this led to an overprotected, spoiled child. Although she could not keep him under her wing forever, she continued to adore him, which may have led to future delusions of grandeur (Lewis p. 6). However, his desire to "prove his toughness" could only have come from his father (Service p. 21). Research has shown that a group of battered children "from psychologically stressed families [...] were unpredictably aggressive toward others" (Frank p. 32); in kind, Stalin became something of a bully: not rough, but vindictive, sly, and devoted to getting his way.

The next major theme in Joseph Dzhughashvili's early years is that of indoctrination. Any child brought up so closely in step with the Russian Orthodox Church, or any religious institution, for that matter, was bound to have been influenced by its teachings. While Joseph clearly took advantage of the education that was offered him, even the pedagoy in his secular subjects has been noted to unduly "praise the tsars and their conquests" (Service p. 35). He was being trained to continue life as a God-fearing, obedient servant of the nation and the church.

However, the aforementioned duality that comes into play in such indoctrination requires the inclusion of his unauthorized studies while at seminary as well. The fact that the church banned modern works by Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, as well as traditional regional works that did not agree with their model of nationalism, serves only to prove this goal. As Service wrote, "the Russian Orthodox Church had become the finest recruiting agency for the revolutionary organizations" (p. 37). The very fact that such revolutionary propagandists as *Kvali* acknowledged the need to "win the hearts and minds of youths like Joseph"

speaks strongly of the willful manipulation of youths through indoctrination.

According to Laurence Steinberg, "brain development during adolescence [involves] systems that are key to the regulation of behavior and emotion and to the perception and evaluation of risk and reward" (p. 69). For the same reason as adults and adolescents are not tried in the same court, adults and adolescents cannot be held to the same level of culpability for their actions.

If that were not enough, research has shown that children with poor relations with strongly religious parents are more likely to rebel against religion (Dudley p. 394), and that rapid changes in one's "religiosity is impacted by "belief polarization"", such as that found by comparing such controversial readings as they discovered in the city of Tiflis with the traditional orthodoxy of the church (Ozorak p. 448). Students in the seminary were ripe for a rebellious form of indoctrination–they found it in the writings of Marx and Lenin.

The last theme that I will explore is that of alienation, both externally imposed and self-inflicted. There is no doubt that Joseph was just "one of the boys" on the street; he underwent several hardships that set him back in his physical development. From the start, he was sickly: at "the age of six he fell victim to smallpox" (Service p. 19). After losing two other children, Keke must have been in a panic throughout the sickness, which continued to influence her preoccupation with him for years to come. The beatings by his father were said to have left blood in his urine (Montefiore p. 23), and being repeatedly run over by a horse-drawn carriage could not have helped the matter (Service p. 25). At the end of these ordeals, Joseph was left with a shortened left arm, a pockmarked face, and the overwhelming conviction that he was "a very special person" (Service p. 21).

Once Joseph ventured out onto the street, he found that his weakened body was no physical match for the "rough-and-tumble" play amongst each "gang" (Service p. 20). His reaction only exacerbated the situation, by causing the other boys to fear him. "He was resentful when he did not get his way," which created rivals amongst his peers (p. 21). This was not only the case while he was young, either; Joseph continued to alienate himself through his own efforts to lead the gang as studied at the Spiritual School in Gori (p. 26).

The fact that Joseph constantly needed to prove his own toughness indicates an overarching concern about inferiority. Indeed, "Grandiosity in bloodthirsty leaders [...] may also be compensatory for feelings of inferiority [...] springing from their lowly, violence-ridden childhoods" (Frank p. 43). That is, Joseph's bad character started early, as a form of compensation, and continued on throughout his adult life. The frequency with which he lost his temper, defied rules or requests, blamed others for his mistakes, and was annoyed by others, as well as his vindictive, and spiteful tendencies, could characterise him as afflicted with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (DSM IV); ODD components have been found to be "significant predictors of adult antisocial behavior" (Langbehn).

Although it cannot be stated for certain that any of these experiences directly influenced the conversion of the young Joseph Dzhughashvili into the bloodthirsty tyrant that was Stalin, there are many indications that they played a major role. While this is not the time for an argument about "nature vs.

nurture", it is clear that many of these are indicators of a tormented adult personality. As has been previously stated, these experiences were likely to have fed into the creation of extraneous aggression, grandiosity, inclination towards rebelliousness, bloodthirstiness and antisocial behavior.

Once Stalin came into proximity with the heart of the Bolshevik party, his personality traits were what got him to the center stage. Although he had not fully convinced Lenin of his good intentions, he was one of the main contenders for the seat of control after Lenin's death. Had he not been sufficiently ambitious and sly in his dealings, he would not have climbed to that point in the party. Similarly, had Stalin not been so vindictive and aggressive, he would not have been rid of his competitors so easily; had he not been so bloodthirsty, he clearly could not have achieved the massacres which occurred under his reign.

While I personally do not believe that the study of the adolescent development and personality traits of Joseph Stalin are not a useful historical tool for this period without proper psychiatric training. However, with proper research into the medical concerns in question, as well as the scientific basis for any given assumption about childhood development and adult personality disorders, it may lead to incredibly fruitful discussion. When one man holds an iron grip over such a large region of the world, particularly during war time, it is impossible to not take his personality disorders and tendencies into account.

As such, it is at least partially the result of the duality in expectation, indoctrination, and alienation that I would consider the three most telling experiences in Joseph Dzhughashvili's childhood. Although none of these factors alone could have predictably created a monster, it is clear that under the circumstances in which Stalin found himself as an adult, as well as these childhood factors, could and did create the man that was Stalin.

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