Stalin: His Youth and Upbringing

- Understanding any historical personage requires at least some attention to his or her childhood and upbringing. This is especially true with regard to dictators who amassed tremendous power. It holds even more so with regard to despots who committed terrible, seemingly senseless crimes. It is, therefore, more important than ever for Joseph Vissarionovich Dzugashvili (a.k.a. Stalin).

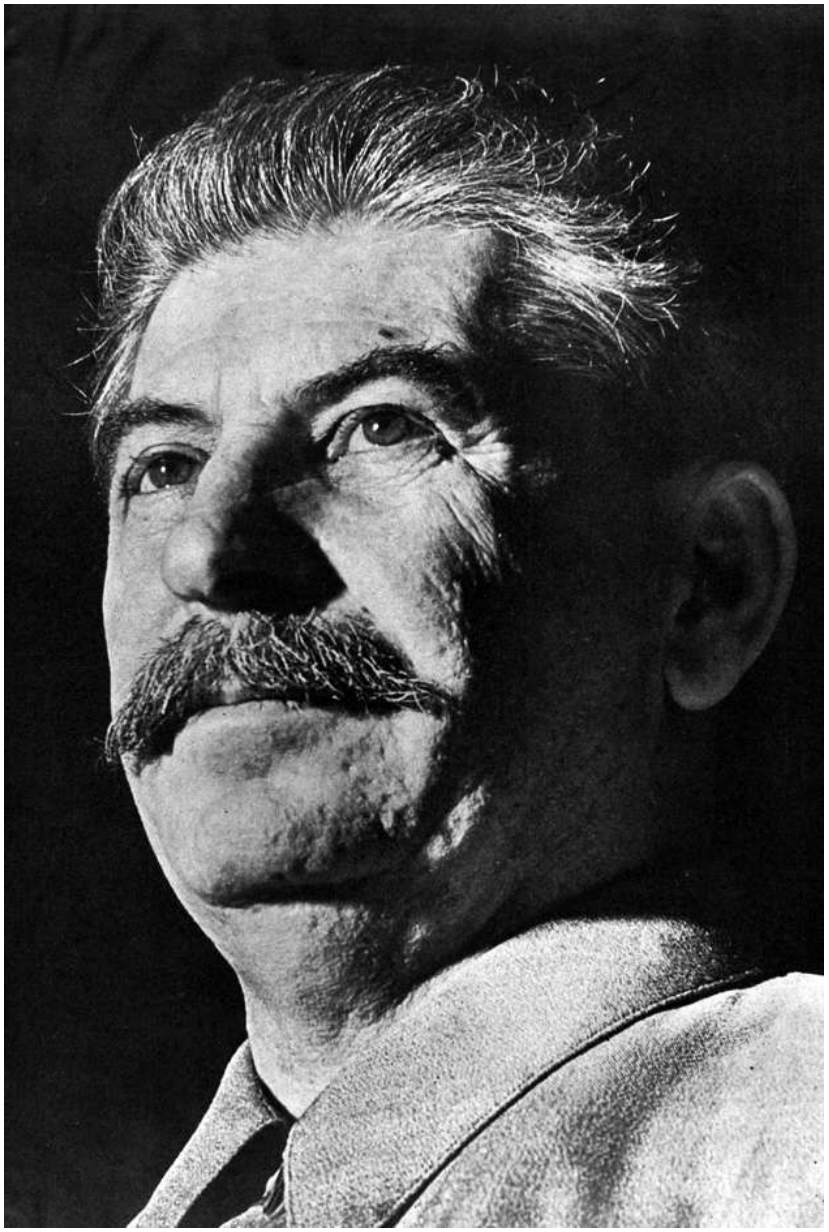
- Stalin was born Joseph Djugashvili in 1879. His place of birth was the village of Gori, near the Georgian capital of Tibilsi. The fact that he was not born Russian, but Georgian, is of significance. Like Napoleon before him, who sought to be the most French of all to hide his Corsican/Italian origins, Stalin would seek to shroud his origins near the Caucasus mountains in great-Russian ultra nationalism. According to certain evidence, Stalin did not even learn to speak Russian until he was seven or eight. He retained a marked Georgian accent until his death. This reality of birth played into Stalin's inherent insecurities throughout his life, enhancing his predilection for spite, vengeance, and nationalist chauvinism.

- The house in which Stalin was born, which was enshrined as a monument in the 1930s.

- Stalin's father was Besarion ("Beso") Djugashvili. Though a cobbler by trade, Beso was first and foremost a severe alcoholic, who not infrequently beat his son and wife during drunken rages. Hitler often claimed to have been mistreated by his father in his youth; most historians, however, argue that this was an exaggeration. Stalin, however, seems most certainly to have been beaten—regularly and hard. The frequent beatings might have killed whatever kernel of sympathy ever existed in Stalin. For a while, Beso had his own shoe-making shop, but his frequent drinking bouts led to bankruptcy. He was forced to take work in a large shoe-factory in Tbilisi for very low wages. Beso, it cannot be emphasized more, was a bitter, bitter man, and with this bitterness he endowed his son.

- It was left for the most part to Stalin's mother, Ekaterina ("Keke") Geladze, to bring up the child, and indeed Stalin spent most of his childhood and youth with his mother. Born a serf (and, therefore, representative of the high degree of slavery still in Russia in the late nineteenth century), Keke nonetheless was literate. She had three children, but only the last—Joseph—survived. According to all of the evidence, she paid a great deal of attention to her son, insisting on his education and directing him to become a priest. At the same time, she seems to have been severe. Near her death, in 1935, Stalin is recorded as having asked her "why she beat [him] so hard." The economic circumstances of the Stalin household were dire. Keke made ends meet through various occupations, including doing housecleaning and laundry. According to certain evidence, she may even have prostituted herself on occasion. Needless to say, the roots of Stalin's antipathy for the "haves"—that is, well-to-do bourgeois people (the enemies of all Marxists)—must have originated here, in his childhood poverty. One can imagine the young child who saw his mother working day in and day out to support him as he observed better-off children in larger, tidier, warm homes. The absence of Stalin's father must have reinforced the ire.
- The parallel with Hitler cannot be ignored: both men grew up in a household where the fathers were absent; both men's mothers doted on them. Stalin's mother, however, seems to have been much harder on her son. This may have resulted in one central difference in both men: Hitler, by all accounts, was charming and desirous of companionship, at least among his "aryan" entourage. Stalin may never have had a true friend.

- If one carefully examines the picture at right, one will notice numerous pock-marks on Stalin's face. These stem from a bout with small pox that he endured at the age of seven. Pictures of him were frequently retouched to obscure the scars. The reason I point this out is that it is yet further evidence of potential insecurities that Stalin carried throughout his life—in this case regarding his appearance. Where art the origins of Stalin's anger, paranoia, hateful obsessions, and emotional sterility? The answers to these questions, though they may never be definitive, are critical to understanding Stalin and Stalinism.



- At the age of ten, Stalin enrolled at the church school in Gori. True to his mother's wishes, in 1894 he went on to the orthodox seminary in Tibilisi, to which he was awarded a scholarship. It was here, among the Orthodox priests, that his revolutionary interests first burgeoned. The curriculum's all but complete disregard for secular, scientific learning instilled a desire to rebel among the students, a sentiment to which Stalin was already predisposed. As Robert Service notes, "[t]he Russian Orthodox Church had become the finest recruiting agency for the revolutionary organizations" (p. 37). Evidence suggests that Stalin read Marx and other revolutionary theorists whose works had been secreted into the school. During this period, he took the nickname Koba, after the robin-hood-like hero in Alexander Kazbegi's *The Patricide*. Stalin's stay at the seminary was cut short when he missed his exams in 1899 and was thrown out.

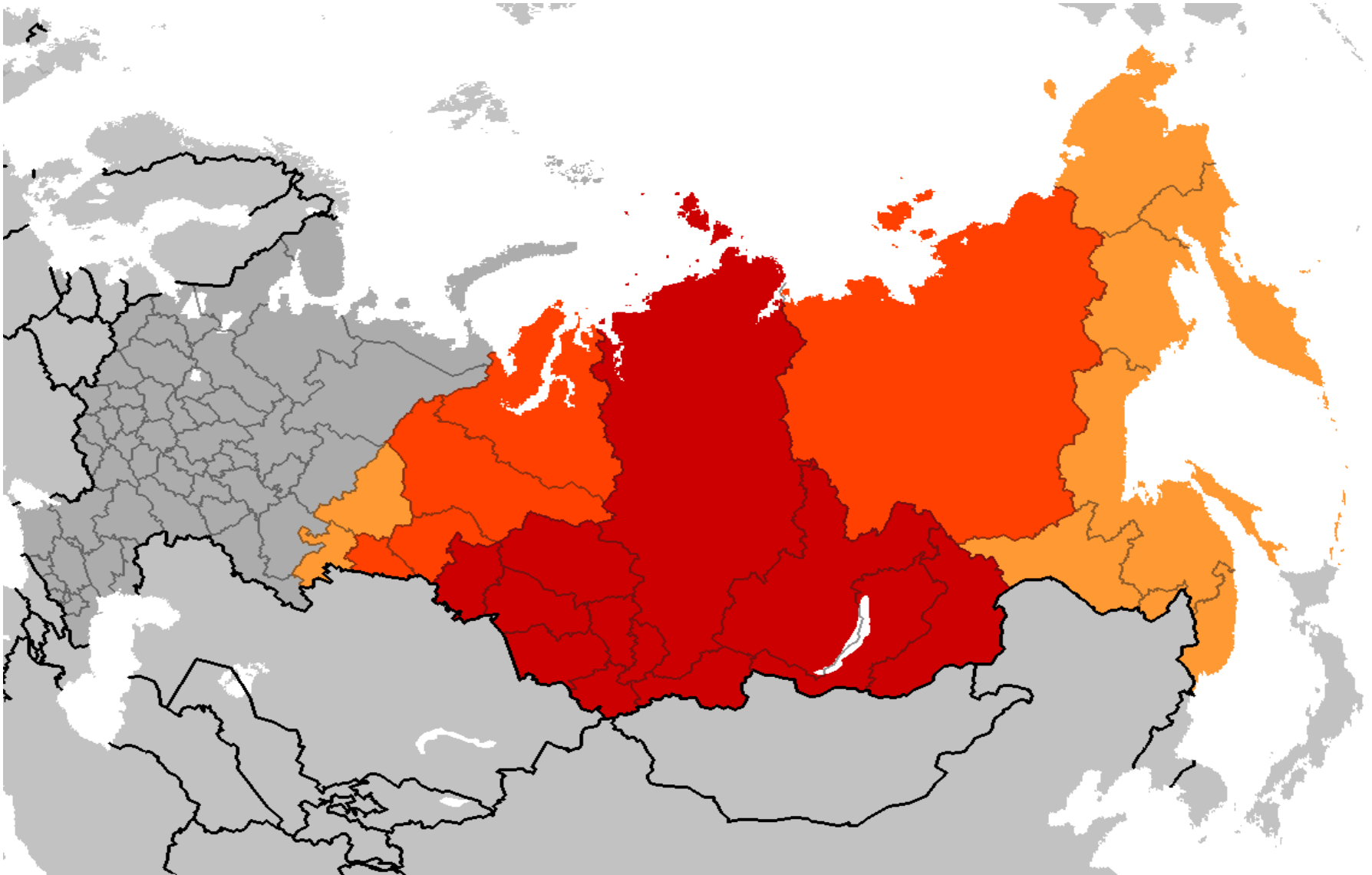
- Thereafter, Stalin descended into radicalism. First, he worked briefly at the Physical Observatory in Tbilisi—not because he wanted to but because he needed the money. It was here, while recording the daily weather patterns in the city (a fairly easy job that required long hours of sitting and waiting, thus permitting long hours of reading), that Stalin adopted Marxism once and for all. Sharing the cramped lodgings at the observatory were two old friends and dissenters. Through the winter of 1899, the threesome spent much of their time complaining about the imperial order and its accompanying economic injustices. Soon their group grew into a veritable cabal. The key ideologues—Marx and Engels—formed the core of the rebels' readings, but so did the works of Russian Marxists like Georgi Plekhanov and Alexander Bogdanov.

- The Czarist political police took a liking to Stalin early on. In March 1901, the police stormed several homes of the rebels, including the observatory, forcing Stalin to flee. He spent several months on the run, but then made his way in November to the Black Sea port of Batumi. Here, he conducted his first work as a Marxist activist, stirring up resentments among port workers. In 1902, he was implicated in a strike and jailed in the local prison. This was the start of his regular sojourns in Czarist prisons and Siberian detention camps, the latter to which he was shipped off after roughly a year at the prison, in this case to the mid-Siberian outpost of Novaya Uda. He nonetheless escaped (something for which he showed a special gift) and made his way back to Tbilisi, then Baku, on the Caspian coast. Here, he worked for a period in the oil fields, spreading Communist ideals among the workers. His Marxist rage, in part the result of his imprisonment, was growing.

- From the beginning, Stalin's comrades in the Czarist gulags recognized that he was sculpted from the hardest stone. Grigol Uratadze, for example, recorded his memory of "Koba," as Stalin insisted on being called, as follows: "He was a very dry person; one might even say that he was desiccated. For example, when we were let outside for exercise and all of us in our particular groups made for this or that corner of the prison yard, Stalin stayed by himself and walked backwards and forwards with his short paces, and if anyone tried speaking to him, he would open his mouth into that cold smile of his and perhaps say a few words. And this unsociability attracted general attention" (cited in Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography*). Such memories are of importance, for they point to the enigmatic quality of Stalin's character—a seeming indifference to normal human relationships bordering on psychopathology.

- Stalin was sent off to Siberia on no less than five occasions, and his stays there, the last of which lasted nearly four years, are of significance. The coldness of Russia's northeastern wastes—the unforgiving wind, bone-cracking cold, the sterile tundra--penetrated Stalin's heart. The coldness of his youth was now coated in Siberian frost. And people who knew him observed the arctic chill. Whereas other Bolsheviks sought solace in companionship, Stalin spent much of his time alone. As Alan Bullock, writing in *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives*, points out, "Stalin did not encourage casual acquaintances, and kept aloof, preferring to spend his time fishing, trapping, reading, and smoking his pipe" (p. 41). According to fellow Bolshevik Jacob Sverdlov, Stalin "turned out to be impossible in personal relations. We had to stop seeing and speaking to eachother."
- Stalin was an obsessively resentful person, and one can imagine the thoughts that burdened his mind during this period. Hatred of the Czarist system that repeatedly exiled him to the ends of the earth, resentment of his father and the poverty of his childhood--such indignations compounded the inherent ire of Marxism. Unlike most Bolsheviks and other political dissidents, Stalin seems to have *enjoyed* Siberia. Given the degree to which Siberia's frigid, barren plains represented his personality, this was not surprising. Siberia remained with him throughout his life.

Map of Siberia



- Two events in Siberia are worth pointing out for their reflection on Stalin's character. Shortly after arriving in Siberia in 1913, Stalin took a room with the Pereprygin family and began an affair with their fourteen-year-old daughter (he preferred very young girls). After making the girl pregnant, he married her in order to avoid prosecution by the local authorities. But no sooner had the marriage documents been signed that he abandoned her and their baby (this was little Yakov, whom Stalin later recognized as his own but treated abusively). Like so many others, this episode exhibited the utter indifference of Stalin to other human beings, including his own children.

- The second event, also pointed out by Service, involves the experience of local villagers who went fishing, only to have one of their members drown in the river. As Service notes, “[w]hat struck Stalin … was how little they thought about the death. … He felt sure that if a cow had been sick, they would have gone out and tried to save it. But the loss of a man for them was a ‘triviality’” (Service, p. 111). Stalin recounted the story in the mid 1930s, just as he was starving millions to death, killing or imprisoning hundreds of thousands of well-to-do farmers, and “purging” from society more than a million “enemies of the state.” The coincidence is of note; the moral of the story had resonance in Stalin’s jaded mind. Human life was combustible—without individual significance.

- Following the general amnesty for political prisoners that accompanied the collapse of Czardom in February 1917, Stalin arrived in Petrograd on March 12. The details of what transpired thereafter are, of course, provided in Service's book. Of significance for our purposes is that he was only given an "advisory" position on the Russian Bureau of the Central Committee. The Bureau's report on the subject read as follows: "About Stalin it was reported that he was an agent of the Central Committee in 1912 and therefore would be desirable in the membership of the Bureau of the Central Committee, but in the light of certain personal features which are basic to him the Bureau of the Central Committee reached its decision to invite him [to join] with an advisory place" (cited in Service, p. 119). What these "personal features" were is not difficult to surmise: a coarse rudeness and evident vindictiveness that bubbled just beneath the surface.

- The topic of Stalin's character would recur frequently among party members in the years to come. Stalin's fellow Bolsheviks were on to his peculiarities; his strange distance from his colleagues was equaled only by the calculation with which he maneuvered among them. As the years progressed, even Lenin himself would progressively grow more aware of the oddness of this enigmatic party member. Still—beyond seeming reason—Stalin would rise in the party. To these subjects, we turn next week.