



Stalin Died 60 Years Too Late

And now we mark the 60th anniversary of his death.

By: Doug Bandow – March 29, 2013

Joseph Stalin died 60 years ago this month. Yet few people in the U.S. paused to mark the passing of one of history's greatest mass murderers.

Death respects no one, no matter how monumental their achievements or, in this case, their crimes. No different was Joseph Stalin, good ole' Uncle Joe in World War II mythology. It is remarkable how someone seemingly so banal and mediocre could have caused so much misery and death.

Stalin was born Joseph Dzhugashvili in 1878 in Gori, Georgia, a province of Imperial Russia. Although he attended an Orthodox seminary he did not inherit his mother's religious faith. By his early 20s he was a Bolshevik agitator. In 1917 he was elected to serve on the Bolshevik Central Committee. His record in the Russian Civil War and Polish-Soviet War was less than stellar, but did not slow his political ascent.

In 1922 he was chosen party General Secretary, which he turned into a position of power. Although Vladimir Lenin turned against Stalin, the former was incapacitated before he could act. Lenin's death in 1924 triggered a lengthy and multi-sided power struggle. Through it all Stalin demonstrated political dexterity if not genius. He allied with Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev against Leon Trotsky, only to later dismiss Kamenev and Zinoviev. Other old revolutionaries, including Nikolai Bukharin and Alexey Rykov, also ended up on Stalin's target list. By 1928 he was in full control.

There were still rivals, however, and in 1934 Sergei Kirov, who ruled the Leningrad Communist Party, was murdered. Even if the killing was not done at Stalin's behest it provided him with a convenient excuse to purge the Soviet Union of his enemies. The Great Terror ensued, imprisoning and killing millions. Kamenev, Zinoviev, Bukharin, and Rykov all were executed after extraordinary show trials. In 1940 Stalin reached beyond the USSR to murder Trotsky, then in exile in Mexico.

It was a difficult time to be a communist. "I have seen the future and it works," declared journalist Lincoln Steffens in 1919. However, the truth shone through for those who looked closely, despite the efforts of the misguided, like Steffens, who eventually became disillusioned with communism, and the malicious, such as Walter Duranty, who covered up the mass starvation-murder called the Holodomor in Ukraine while reporting for the New York Times (which has never formally repudiated his Pulitzer Prize).

The grand public inquisitions of former top Bolshevik leaders were particularly embarrassing. It turned out that virtually every early revolutionary surrounding Lenin, the majority of party members during the early years, and much of the military hierarchy

were traitors. Apparently only Stalin's heroic efforts saved the Revolution by rooting out the top miscreants, along with millions of their closest confederates.

The Communist Party which overthrew Russian Emperor Nicholas created an even more godlike Red Czar. Adolf Hitler demanded obedience. Stalin demanded veneration. He was the Father of Nations, Genius of Humanity, and even the Gardener of Human Happiness! Soviet history books steadily elevated his revolutionary role. Top Soviet revolutionaries and leaders were air-brushed out of old photographs.

The toughest blow for good-natured Western communists was the Hitler-Stalin pact. Suddenly loyal communists had to explain how the anti-Semitic murderers who suppressed the German Communist Party had become valued partners of the world's only communist state.

Horrible as it all was, there was a measure of justice in each turn of the screw. Murderous revolutionaries were murdered. Loyal communists were punished for disloyalty. Communists who fled political persecution in other states were accused of being spies for those states. Military men responsible for defending against Nazi Germany were charged with working for Nazi Germany. In Stalin's Soviet Union, no good deed, even by the most committed communist revolutionary, went unpunished.

However, there were millions of truly innocent victims. For instance, lengthy prison terms were handed down for such offenses as writing innocuous notes on a picture of Stalin in a newspaper. While many arrests and murders fulfilled a horrific, perverse logic, the process took on a bizarre life of its own.

Explained social scientist R.J. Rummel:

[M]urder and arrest quotas did not work well. Where to find the "enemies of the people" they were to shoot was a particularly acute problem for the local NKVD, which had been diligent in uncovering "plots." They had to resort to shooting those arrested for the most minor civil crimes, those previously arrested and released, and even mothers and wives who appeared at NKVD headquarters for information about their arrested loved ones.

Stalin finally tired of the endless killing, or more likely the practical problems which inevitably resulted. The purges ebbed in 1938, though killings, including of Soviet defectors and "White Russian" exiles, continued. Soviet society had little time in which to recover before the German onslaught in June 1941.

His rule survived despite manifold costly blunders in the four years of horrific war that followed. With Soviet troops advanced well into Germany, Stalin won the peace, turning eastern Europe into Eastern Europe, with pliant regimes in control of most of his neighbors. Within the Soviet Union there was no new purge, but millions of people of suspect nationalities — Chechens, Crimean Tartars, Volga Germans, and others — were deported, with many dying in the process.

The Cold War sundered the war-time anti-Nazi coalition. With Moscow's support, Mao Zedong and China's communists overthrew the incompetent and corrupt Chiang Kai-Shek. Stalin also created a satellite state in North Korea, headed by Kim Il-sung, who launched his own war against the South in 1950.

However, the old paranoia appeared to rise again, with a show trial of Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee members. There also were claims of the "Doctors' Plot." A medical cabal, with several Jewish members, was supposedly planning to assassinate Stalin and other officials. Historians believe that Stalin may have been planning the widespread arrest and imprisonment of Soviet Jews, and/or another party purge. However, time ran out for the man who had killed so many others.

He was struck with a cerebral hemorrhage on March 1, 1953 and died four days later. At least, that is the official story. There were persistent claims that KGB head Lavrenti Beria may have poisoned the dictator. He had good cause to fear, since the man he replaced, Nikolai Yezhov, ended up dead. As did Yezhov's predecessor, Genrikh Yagoda. Dueling autopsies have reached divergent conclusions on whether Stalin's death was natural or murder.

Stalin's death triggered a lengthy power struggle among his associates, which saw Beria's execution and Nikita Khrushchev's eventual triumph. Moreover, in a secret speech to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in February 1956, Khrushchev denounced Stalin for assorted crimes. In later years top officials, such as Khrushchev, lost power but were not executed.

However, the Evil Empire, as President Ronald Reagan called it, survived another 33 years. And Communism continued to kill many others, both in and out of the Soviet Union.

We will never know with any certainty the size of Stalin's murder roll. Official figures suggest around three million, but they are not reliable let alone comprehensive: for example, not counted are Soviet prisoners who were killed during interrogation or who died shortly after release, deportees who died in transit, and those killed by the Red Army, including Soviet deserters, Polish prisoners, and German civilians. Russian Vadim Erlikman estimated 9.2 million deaths: five million in the Gulag, 1.7 million from deportation, 1.5 million from executions, and 1 million from maltreatment of foreign POWs/German civilians.

Another ten million likely perished from famine and related causes, with Ukraine, once the Russian Empire's breadbasket, the epicenter of death. Some historians argue that Stalin didn't intend to kill so many people; rather, the deaths were the result of forced collectivization. But that is no excuse for enforcing a policy with such destructive consequences. Include famine deaths and Stalin's toll is almost 20 million — in 2007 Robert Conquest figured at least 15 million — though some analysts believed that Stalin's victim toll went as high as an improbable 60 million.

One could legitimately share casualties of World War II. Hitler almost certainly would have had his war anyway, but it would have been a very different conflict. Stalin made it easy for Nazi Germany to conquer western Europe before ravaging eastern Europe.

Ignoring impending signs of Hitler's assault also cost countless Soviet soldiers and civilians their lives.

Alas, peer back through a glass darkly and the millions of dead seem to be but a statistic, as Stalin is commonly if not necessarily accurately said to have observed. Hitler's slaughter was unique given his attempt to eradicate an entire people; Mao's direct killings probably were more numerous. But Stalin inaugurated mass murder as a standard policy tool for 20th century dictators, modeling the political purge, labor camp, and planned famine.

Yet the reputation of Stalin, a moral monster by any standard, has enjoyed a bit of a revival. He was denounced by Khrushchev in 1956 and many victims were released, if still alive, or posthumously rehabilitated, if not. However, even Khrushchev began to back away from active de-Stalinization before he was ousted in 1964. While Leonid Brezhnev and his cronies did not revive Stalin's murderous practices they ended reexamination of that era, forcing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn into exile after foreign publication of the latter's masterwork, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Mikhail Gorbachev allowed a renewed reappraisal, which became a flood after the Soviet Union's collapse. However, once open records have closed and the chaos of post-communist life created nostalgia for Stalinist order. When I last visited Russia pensioners were demonstrating in Red Square holding pictures of Stalin. Reason magazine's Cathy Young, whose paternal grandparents were imprisoned for attempting to escape to Palestine, noted that a February poll found that half of Russians viewed Stalin's role as entirely or mostly positive, compared to just a third who believed it was entirely or mostly negative.

This is depressing if not entirely unexpected, given the collapse in Russian power and rise of authoritarian Vladimir Putin. Less understandable, argued Young, is "the persistent double standard when it comes to communist and Nazi crimes." Communist and even Stalinist apologists "are treated with a respect no one would ever dream of according to ex-Nazis or Hitler whitewashers."

Although it rarely seems appropriate to wish death on others, Stalin was a well-deserved exception. Six decades ago he finally succumbed to the fate that he had imposed on millions of others. Yet his legacy, attenuated but real, lives on.