

Stalin's Birthday: An Inauspicious December Day for Millions

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If you look at the U.S. today, you might believe that we are all socialists now. Republicans no less than Democrats spend wildly. There is little that Uncle Sam does not fund or subsidize. Bernie Sanders was a serious candidate for president. Since 2010, roughly half of Millennials and Gen Z-ers have expressed a positive view of socialism.

It is worth remembering what socialism, real, tough-minded socialism, is like.

We typically celebrate birthdays, at least until we reach “a certain age.” But not all birthdays are worthy of celebration.

It was a different world in 1878, but on December 18 of that year Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin was born. Other than his parents, no one would have noted his arrival in the city of Gori in the Russian Empire, now the country of Georgia. Born to an unsuccessful shoemaker in a distant province, he could have expected to live something akin to the life philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously described as “poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

He fulfilled all these conditions other than “short.” The only one of his parents’ children to survive infancy, he was called Soso. His alcoholic father beat mother and son. But Stalin was a good student and ended up going to seminary at age 15. He eventually called himself an atheist;

read revolutionary texts, from which he took his nickname Koba; attended political meetings, and left school in 1899.

He became a political activist, narrowly avoided arrest, organized protests while on the run, and was detained and sent into internal exile. Months later he escaped and after returning to Georgia joined the Bolsheviks. He met Bolshevik leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in 1905. In succeeding years he worked with fellow Bolsheviks, though he was often arrested and then imprisoned or exiled. He was living in Siberia when the liberal March Revolution overthrew the Tsar. After that Stalin returned to Petrograd, Russia's capital. In October came the Bolshevik Revolution, turning the 28-year-old former seminarian into one of his nation's rulers.

His birth name was Dzhugashvili. The revolutionary pseudonym that he took, Stalin, meant "man of steel." It proved to be tragically appropriate.

Of course, power had to be consolidated and a civil war had to be won. In both endeavors Stalin's ruthlessness proved useful. His conduct of the war against Poland put him in conflict with Trotsky, dividing them even before their later epic power struggle. In 1922, Lenin appointed the Georgian party general secretary. A month later Lenin had his first stroke, which increased Stalin's role. Lenin soon soured on his choice but died in 1924 before he could act.

Over the next five years, Stalin engaged in one of the most brilliant displays of gaining, solidifying, and exercising power in history. With Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev he defeated and later exiled Leon Trotsky, the brilliant and brutal civil war military commander. Then he worked with Nikolai Bukharin, perhaps the only senior Bolshevik with a hint of humanity, to toss Kamenev and Zinoviev from the Soviet Communist Party. Finally, Stalin moved against the popular Bukharin, expelling him from the Politburo in 1929.

As Stalin's power increased, he unleashed the Great Terror. Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Bukharin headlined show trials that resulted in their execution. Trotsky was assassinated in exile. History was rewritten and photos were airbrushed to remove the not so dear but still departed.

More than anyone else, Stalin made the modern Soviet nation — essentially a renamed Russian Empire — but at extraordinary cost. He played an important role in the Russian Civil War, the essential second step after the revolution. Estimates of total casualties in the Russian Civil War range between seven and 12 million. Blame was widely shared between the Reds and Whites, both of which engaged in mass murder and launched terror campaigns. Many civilians died of disease and starvation. But Stalin had a well-earned reputation for being lavish in his sacrifice of blood, both through his callous military tactics and brutal repression against supposed counter-revolutionaries and even peasants who refused to surrender their crops.

Stalin used his plan for industrialization backed by confiscation of crops and collectivization of agriculture to defeat Bukharin, who was considered “right-wing” on economics and property rights. Stalin was the genuine socialist and imposed his philosophy with especially brutal results on Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Caucasus, and the Volga region. The result in the latter was the Great Famine, or Holodomor, especially harsh in 1932–33, which killed as many as 10 million. Although he may not have willed all those deaths, Stalin did want to eliminate “kulaks,” land-owning peasants, as a class. And murder was the most effective means to do so.

Stalin also was author of the Great Purge or Great Terror, which was focused on the Communist Party and its most loyal apparatchiks. While the show trials were farcical miscarriages of justice, it was hard to feel terribly sorry for the accused, who, after all, were responsible along with Stalin for the Bolshevik Revolution and Soviet state. All were drenched in blood. And, indeed, the same could be said, though obviously on a lesser scale, of many of the lesser figures who were caught up in madness. They were merely reaping what they had sowed.

Nevertheless, the pressure to expose and punish presumed enemies left virtually no one safe. The numbers of those killed and imprisoned will never be known with certainty, and some on the left have attempted to minimize the number murdered. Robert Conquest, author of *The Great Terror*, figured around a million “legally” executed and upwards of 15 million total killed. Conquest explained, “Exact numbers may never be known with complete certainty, but the total of deaths caused by the whole range of Soviet regime’s terrors can hardly be *lower* than some fifteen million.”

The inhumanity of the process was almost beyond description. Preserved in the Soviet archives were pages of names of people listed for liquidation signed by Stalin. They were simply numbers to him, instruments of his determination to rule and paranoia about opposition.

One of the most arresting images of the Great Terror come from R. J. Rummel, author of *Death by Government*:

Murder 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 [secret police], 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.

There was more, so much more, during the more than three decades in which Stalin played a leading role in Soviet politics. Entire peoples, such as the Volga Germans, Chechens, and Crimean Tartars, were viewed as Nazi collaborators and deported. Many Soviet prisoners of war were treated as criminals, and roughly half were imprisoned on their release from German prison camps at the end of World War II. There were mass deportations from the Baltic countries, swallowed by the Soviet Union after the Hitler–Stalin pact but never reconciled to communist rule; many residents had welcomed Nazi soldiers as liberators.

Mass repression and slaughter eventually ebbed. Yet there were the day-to-day injustices of life in a totalitarian society. There was repression, imprisonment, and murder, but on a retail rather

than wholesale basis. And paranoia never left Stalin. Before his death he apparently was preparing for another purge. He began his earlier terror campaigns by having the secret police chief arrested and killed. This is one reason why Lavrentiy Beria, Stalin's long-time hatchet man, is suspected of having poisoned Stalin.

Of course, it was not just Soviets who suffered and died at Stalin's hands. German POWs remained in Soviet camps into the mid-1950s, laboring for the Soviet State. Nearly 400,000 died in the USSR after the war had ended. Moscow began the war as de facto ally of Nazi Germany, seizing half of Poland. To cement its control over the occupied territory, in April and May 1940 it slaughtered some 22,000 Polish soldiers, police, intelligentsia, professionals, and other leaders in Katyn Forest and the Kalinin and Kharkiv Prisons.

Stalin died on March 5, 1953. It was the end of an era. Soviet leaders stopped jailing and killing one another. The camps were closed. Loyal communists were rehabilitated. A regime beyond horror became merely another oppressive state. It was still an "evil empire," as Ronald Reagan termed it, but no longer beyond the horrific scope of human imagination.

How many people did Stalin kill? He surely was in the running for worst mass murderer in history. The best that can be said for him is that China's Mao Zedong probably killed more — after all, the latter's country had more people to kill. And Stalin did not share with Adolf Hitler the uniquely monstrous desire to wipe out an entire people.

To Mikhail Gorbachev's credit, Gorbachev worked to redress Stalin's crimes, to the extent that they could be redressed. Alexander Yakovlev, who chaired the Commission for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions, figured "about 32 million people became victims of political repressions, including 13 million during" the civil war.

It proved to be extremely difficult for Yakovlev, who had loyally served the Soviet state but retained a human core. He explained,

To descend step by step down seventy years of Bolshevik rule into a dungeon strewn with human bones and reeking of dried blood is to see your faith in humankind dissolve.... More and more bloodstained documents pile up on my desk.... Nothing I have ever read comes close to the horror of these semiliterate compositions of the secret police and these covert denunciations of informants, or "well-wishers." I ought to be used to them by now. I'm not.

Some communists have made a great effort to excuse the Soviet Union's crimes by blaming them all on Stalin. If only Lenin had lived, they argue, the Man of Steel would have been removed by Lenin. Then warm and cuddly Bolsheviks would have streamed forth and created a socialist land of benevolence, generosity, plenty, love, and goodness. People would have held hands and sung "Kumbaya" before returning to work to ensure implementation to the great principle: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

That is complete nonsense, of course. Lenin was the cold and consummate revolutionary. He was driven and implacable, the man without whom the incompetent socialists and liberals who populated the provisional government might have stumbled on and at least successfully resisted the most extreme factions, represented by the Bolsheviks. He also understood the need for peace at any price and agree to Germany's harsh demands in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Otherwise the Bolsheviks, too, likely would have been swept from power by a people tired of being pressed into fighting a senseless war.

Moreover, he did everything possible, including unleashing an early Red Terror during the civil war and crushing the Kronstadt rebellion by sailors and others desiring bourgeois liberties. The Cheka, the original secret police, was created Lenin and the other Bolshevik leaders barely a month after the revolution. It was headed by the influential Polish communist Felix Dzerzhinsky, who also died early and whose passing was mourned by the revolutionary elite. His statue long stood in the square in front of the KGB headquarters at Lubyanka in Moscow. Finally, Lenin's objection to Stalin was the latter's coarseness and rudeness, not his brutality and cruelty.

After Stalin died he was placed alongside Lenin in the famous tomb in Red Square. But Stalin's lieutenants almost immediately began a process of de-Stalinization. They quickly organized to arrest and execute Beria, who, ironically, may have been the most liberal in terms of relations with the West. In February 1956 came Nikita Khrushchev's famous speech "On the Personality Cult and Its Consequences" to the Soviet Communist Party Congress. Another nearly six years passed, after which Khrushchev decided to rebury Stalin's remains in front of the Kremlin wall. Khrushchev observed, "The further retention there of the sarcophagus with the bier of Stalin shall be recognized as inappropriate, due to the serious violations by Stalin of Lenin's precepts, abuse of power, mass repressions against honorable Soviet people." But whatever remains of the man is still resting in a place of honor by one of the most recognizable buildings in one of the most recognizable squares on Earth.

Socialism isn't for the faint-hearted. True socialism, anyway. Not the big-spending redistributionism of Bernie Sanders, a socialist fake, a millionaire with three homes. He wouldn't have lasted long in the early Bolshevik years — it would have been to the Gulag or worse for him.

Perhaps Stalin deserves our thanks for demonstrating the logical development of honest, tough-minded socialism. Millennials and Gen Z-ers should keep that in mind the next time they are asked their opinion of socialism. It never ends well. At least for people and other living things.

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