

Me the school, soso  
(his schoolboy  
nickname)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

me ruler who more than any other individual molded the features that characterized the Soviet regime and shaped the direction of post-World War II Europe; in this regard, Stalin may be considered the most powerful person to live during the 20th century. Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, as he was originally named he adopted the pseudonym Stalin, meaning “ a man of steel,” only about 1910 was born on December 21, 1879, in Gori, now in the Republic of Georgia. Both his parents were Georgian peasants.

Neither of them spoke Russian, but Stalin was forced to learn it, as the language of instruction, when he attended the Gori church school in 1888-94. The best pupil in the school, Soso (his schoolboy nickname) earned a full scholarship to the Tbilisi Theological Seminary. The Revolutionary While studying for the priesthood, Stalin read forbidden literature, including Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, and soon converted to a new orthodoxy: Russian Marxism. Before graduation he quit the seminary to become a full-time revolutionary. Stalin began his career in the Social-Democratic party in 1899 as a propagandist among Tbilisi railroad workers. The police caught up with him in 1902. Arrested in Batum, he spent more than a year in prison before being exiled to Siberia, from which he escaped in 1904. This became a familiar pattern.

Between 1902 and 1913 Stalin was arrested eight times; he was exiled seven times and escaped six times. The government contained him only once; his last exile in 1913 lasted until 1917. On his return from Siberia in 1904 Stalin married. His first wife, Yekaterina Svanidze, died in 1910.

A second wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, whom he married in 1919, committed suicide in 1932. In the last years of czarist Russia (1905-17) Stalin was more of an up-and-coming follower than a leader. He always supported the Bolshevik faction of the party, but his contribution was practical, not theoretical. Thus, in 1907 he helped organize a bank holdup in Tbilisi “ to expropriate” funds. Lenin raised him into the upper reaches of the party in 1912 by co-opting him into the Bolsheviks’ Central Committee. The next year he briefly edited the new party newspaper, Pravda (Truth), and at Lenin’s urging wrote his first major work, *Marxism and the Nationality Question*. Before this treatise appeared (1914), however, Stalin was sent to Siberia. After the Revolution of March 1917, Stalin returned to Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg), where he resumed the editorship of Pravda.

Together with Lev Kamenev, Stalin dominated party decisions in the capital before Lenin arrived in April. The two advocated a policy of moderation and cooperation with the provisional government. Although he played a not insignificant role in the armed uprising that followed in November, Stalin was not remembered as a revolutionary hero. In the words of one memoirist, he produced the impression of a “ grey blur.” The Administrator As the Bolsheviks’ expert on nationalism, Stalin was Lenin’s choice to head the Commissariat for Nationality Affairs. Together with Yakov Sverdlov and Leon Trotsky, he helped Lenin decide all emergency issues in the difficult first period of the civil war. Stalin participated in that war as a commander on several fronts. Within the party Stalin strengthened his position by dogged organizational work and devotion to administrative tasks.

He was commissar for state control in 1919-23, and more important in 1922 he became secretary-general of the party. As Stalin converted this organizational base into a source of political power, he came into conflict with Lenin on several minor but ultimately telling issues. Before his death, Lenin came to regard the flaws in Stalin's personality and conduct as political liabilities. In his political "testament" Lenin doubted whether the party's general secretary would use his great power with sufficient caution. He also attacked Stalin as being "too rude" and called for his removal. Luck and adroit maneuvering enabled Stalin to suppress Lenin's testament. The Despot After Lenin's death Stalin joined in a troika with Grigory Zinovyev and Kamenev to lead the country.

With these temporary allies, Stalin acted against his archrival Trotsky, the foremost candidate for Lenin's mantle. Once the threat of Trotsky was eliminated, however, Stalin reversed course, aligning himself with Nikolay Bukharin and Aleksey Rykov against his former partners. Trotsky, Zinovyev, and Kamenev in turn challenged Stalin as the "left opposition." By skillful manipulation and clever sloganeering, but especially by interpreting Lenin's precepts to a new generation coming of age in the 1920s, Stalin bested all his rivals. By his 50th birthday (1929), Stalin had cemented his position as Lenin's recognized successor and entrenched his power as sole leader of the Soviet Union. Stalin reacted to lagging agricultural production in the late '20s by a ruthless, personally supervised expropriation of grain from peasants in Siberia. When other crises threatened in late 1929, he expanded what had been a moderate collectivization program into a nationwide offensive against

the peasantry. Millions were displaced, and unknown thousands died in the massive collectivization.

The industrialization campaigns over which Stalin presided in the 1930s were much more successful; these raised the backward USSR to the rank of the industrial powers. In the mid-1930s Stalin launched a major campaign of political terror. The purges, arrests, and deportations to labor camps (see CONCENTRATION CAMP) touched virtually every family. Former rivals Zinovyev, Kamenev, and Bukharin admitted to crimes against the state in show trials and were sentenced to death. Untold numbers of party, industry, and military leaders disappeared during the “ Great Terror,” making way for a rising generation that included such leaders as Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev.

Fear instilled by a political secret police formed an essential part of the system called Stalinism. See KGB. The War Leader In part because the purges stripped the military of its leadership, the Soviet Union suffered greatly in World War II.

Stalin personally directed the war against Nazi Germany. By rallying the people, and by his willingness to make great human sacrifices, he turned the tide against the Germans, notably at the Battle of Stalingrad. Stalin participated in the Allies’ meetings at Tehran (1943), Yalta (1945), and Potsdam (1945), where he obtained recognition of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, and after the war he extended Communist domination over most of the countries liberated by the Soviet armies. His single-minded determination to prevent yet another devastating assault on

the USSR from the West had much to do with the growth of the cold war. In his last years, increasingly paranoid and physically weak, Stalin apparently was about to start another purge. In January 1953 he ordered the arrest of many Moscow doctors, mostly Jews, charging them with medical assassinations.

The so-called Doctors' Plot seemed to herald a return to the 1930s, but Stalin's sudden death on March 5, 1953, in Moscow forestalled another bloodbath. Evaluation Although the ironfisted ruler of a mighty nation, Stalin has remained an enigmatic figure and his role in history a controversial one. Soviet historians assess his regime as a great one, although marred by some errors, but Western scholars assail the bloody terror of his rule. The question is whether or not the Soviet Union would have made the same progress under less despotic leadership. Three years after his death, the 20th Party Congress denounced Stalin and much that he represented.