

# Stalin biographies essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Beginning with the Soviet myths reinforced by propagandist posters and an official biography, the 'great man', Joseph Stalin (birth name: Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili) has left behind a legacy that confronts historians with a conundrum; to decode the personality, psychology, intentions and influence of his person, clouded by historical inaccuracies within Soviet archives attributed to the "cult of personality" and political agendas of subsequent leaders such as the Stalinist myths endorsed by Nikita Khrushchev[1].

It is my intention in this essay to address the issues biographers have uncouncted since the first biography of historical merit was accepted and referenced too in academia; Isaac Deutscher, Stalin, A political biography, Oxford University, London, 1961[2] and to address the question as to why the interpretations of Stalin have changed over time. In order to address this I will focus on three major biographies which are as follows, the previously mentioned biography of Stalin by Isaac Deutscher.

Young Stalin by Simon Sebag Montefiore[3] (a prequel to his first biography of Stalin, The Court of the Red Tsar[4]) and Robert Services, Stalin: A Biography[5] (reference to others will be made). As to what is the cause of changing interpretations I offer the following factors; Interpretation and selection of soviet archive material, the authors ideological bias, the increasingly availability of sources, and the different movements in the study of psychology and personality. Biography as history We do not understand the history of Russia, or of most of Europe, if we are not familiar with the biography of Josef Stalin.

What we know about Stalin has changed as new biographers have found new sources enabling us to tell more about him; but as we learn more about Stalin we learn more about Russia. The Stalin biographies by Montefiore and by Robert Service tell us more about Stalin and about Russia than did the earlier biography by Deutscher. The “ great man” approach to history is now out of fashion with many historians, but in the case of men like Stalin who dominated the life of their country for so long it remains important.

The biographies of people such as Stalin along with Churchill in Britain, FD Roosevelt in America, Hitler in Germany, must be studied to understand their place and their times. Some historians go further. Professor Robert I Rotberg of Harvard University, for example, argues that: Biography is history, depends on history, and strengthens and enriches history. In turn, all history is biography. History could hardly exist without biographical insights—without the texture of human endeavor that emanates from a full appreciation of human motivation, the real or perceived constraints on human action, and exogenous influences on human behavior.

Social forces are important, but they act on and through individuals. Structural and cultural variables are important, but individuals pull the levers of structure and act within or against cultural norms...Most of the time, history is the product of rational actors...[6] Similarly, his fellow American historian Professor Stanley Wolpert argues that: ...at its best, biography is the finest form of history. The light of truth embodied in biographical history is the most effective antidote to malicious historical falsehoods, our gravest “ errors of judgment.

Learning about the roots of mistakes and errors of judgment in history may someday teach us to avoid repeating them. [7] Availability of sources and its impact on historical approaches to biography. Deutscher had previously considered writing a History of the Soviet Union but the Oxford Press told him no. They wanted a biography of Stalin. For the first time there existed enough primary evidence and substantial documentation to write a biography of historical merit on Stalin (unlike earlier biographies that had to make up for a lack of evidence with rumor and speculation).

When Deutscher wrote his Biography in the late nineteen-forties a great deal of fresh historical documentation had become available (included in this is the documentation of Stalin's secret speech of 1925 on Russia's position on war and foreign policy) however Deutscher's biography was written before Khrushchev released documentation on the extent of Stalin's purges[8], thus Deutscher's account of the Kirov affair and the Tukhachevsky purge is somewhat limited compared to Service's.

The information available allowed Deutscher to create a politically concise biography of Stalin, that encompassed his youth in the socialist underground, involvement in the civil war and rise from commissar to leader of the Soviet Union, however Deutscher's biography has one large gap: the later period of Stalin's life " I am refraining from an attempt to bring the book up to date with the final chapter covering this period, because all too little documentation is available. [2] Deutscher took an structuralist approach to understanding Stalin, Deutscher focused on Stalin's politics and policy with little focus on his personality, psychology, motives and the effect they had on politics and society " I make no apology for calling this a political

biography. I admit that I am inclined to study the politics rather than the private affairs of public men”.

Deutscher's interpretation of Stalin and his approach to history had to be applicable to his sources, thus taking an intentionalist approach; (that of discussing personality and psychology) with his limited documentation was not possible “ It is impossible to narrate the private life of Stalin, since only one letter of his is yet to come to light”[2]. This correlation between availability of sources and the approach to history taken by Deutscher indicates that a major factor contributing to why the interpretations of Stalin have changed is that a writer is naturally inclined to take an approach that compliments his sources.

When a post-cold war historian sets out to create a biography of Stalin he is inundated with evidence released from the Soviet archives. When Boris Yeltsin became president he opened the soviet archives to public scrutiny and thus both Montefiore and Service had access to information that Deutscher did not. These circumstances have directly impacted how the interpretations of Stalin have formed; they have formed around a new problem, the problem of sifting the evidence.

The problem of sifting the evidence is an issue relating to subjectivity and ideological bias, the question is how can a historian strive to be objective (regardless of its attainability) and avoid bias when the selection of material, evidence and documentation would inevitably be influenced by subliminal or conscious ideological/ political bias? This issue was addressed by both Montefiore and Service in their prefaces.

Services outlining of his approach to Stalin in his preface is an example of new source material released (in this case released post-nineteen-eighties) has changed interpretation. " The aim is to bring together what are usually called intentionalism and structuralism as well as to combine what may be termed synchronic and diachronic approaches" [5] This approach led to his interpretation of Stalin as a " more dynamic figure than has been conventionally been supposed.

Stalin was a bureaucrat and a killer, he was also a leader, a writer and editor, a theorist (of sorts), a bit of a poet (when young), a follower of the arts, a family man and even a charmer. " [5] A result of the masses of new documentation since the opening of the vaults in the nineteen-eighties is an emphasis on personality, psychology, private life and the youth of Stalin.

While Deutscher claimed these factors to be of little relevance to a political biography and only dedicated the opening chapter to Stalin's youth as a kind of annoying necessity of biography; Montefiore wrote an entire book on the subject and considered it vital in the understand on Stalinist politics, summarized in his question " What missing empathy in Stalin's upbringing allowed him to kill so easily, but equally what quality equipped him so well for political life? ". [3] Psychology and personality.

In Deutscher's time the relevance of psychology and personality to history was second the actions of ' great men' and their impact on society however In subsequent years many other matters and documents did become available, providing many useful sources for later biographers, such as Robert Service, Simon Sebag Montefiore and others. Service, for example,

has detailed chapters on Stalin's family, his schooling for the priesthood, and his early years as poet and rebel before his life as a militant Marxist.

In his introductory chapter on “ Stalin as we have known him” Service stresses the importance of Stalin's harsh Georgian childhood and family life in terms of his later political and leadership styles: “...was his behaviour merely the reflection of a Georgian upbringing? Ideas of personal dignity and revenge were widespread in his native land, especially in the rural areas... The dysfunctionality of the Dzhughashvili family was remarked upon by his friends.

His own odd character was worsened by his later experience of being under appreciated by his comrades in the revolutionary movement; and the tenets and practices of communism confirmed his harsher tendencies. ” [5]

Montefiore's Young Stalin provides a comment in its Introduction on why the writing of this account of his early years became possible only recently. He notes that there are few works on early Stalin, stating that there was so little material.

The opening of the archives for independent scholarship allowed Montefiore to bring to light the Stalin he describes as “ revolutionary, gangster, poet, trainee priest, husband and prolific lover, abandoning women and illegitimate children in his wake”[3] who went on to take his first step in politics as a commissar. Montefiore's research enabled him to present a photographic history of the development of Commissar Stalin. Some current biographers have functioned as a bridge between the science of psychology and the social science of history. The importance of psychology in history is a

result of a growing amount of psychological theories and movements adopted in biography.

Robert C. Tucker is one of these biographers, his biography on Stalin titled *Stalin in Power The Revolution From Above* adopts a psychological approach to discover what made Stalin act in the manner he did. This is centered around Stalin's identification with his own conception of Lenin as a revolutionary hero, which he was unable to match up to, and the knowledge that others recognized his shortcomings as well. "Stalin was fully aware of the difference between how he wanted to appear and wanted others to see him, and what he and others knew he really was.

Stalin had 'to blot out of his mind the disparities between the idealized Stalin with whom he identified himself and the scheming, bungling, blemished, evil-doing Stalin that he very often had been and still was, never before so vilely as now'. [1] The myths In the case of Stalin the evidence itself is elusive. It has been subject not to more than one myth. There is what Tucker calls "the politics of revolutionary biography": from at least the nineteen-twenties the pre-revolutionary careers of Lenin's potential successors; Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin and Stalin were the subject of controversy.

Two myths emerged: the Stalinist myth of the lives of Stalin and Trotsky, and the Trotskyist myth. Both myths were recomposed as political circumstances and agendas changed. Another myth came about after Stalin's death in 1953 as the "cult of personality" (see posters) was ended. This happened at the time the Khrushchev myth of Stalin was created. To this we owe a great deal



of information previously unavailable, but it has to be used with caution (this information was released from soviet archives after the writing of Deutschers political biography).

These myths create a major obstacle for biographers, evidence from soviet archives and popular interpretation of Stalin is likely contaminated with myth as a result of conflicting eras of soviet political agenda spanning over half a century. Deutscher was a Marxist and Trotskyite for much of his life but broke from the ideology in nineteen thirty-three, however he remained sympathetic towards the Trotskyite myth of Stalin and the Marxists idea of historical evolution and its influence can be seen in the biography.

However post nineteen-eighties biographers have found the myths as less of an obstacle; since much more information has become available, verifiable sources such as the letter sent to Prince Golitsyn during his time as a prisoner have delivered an insight into the personality of Stalin without the need to rely on myth “ My worsening cough and the pitiful condition of my aged mother, who was left by her husband twelve years ago and of whome I am the only support, force me to apply for the second time for a jumble discharge, under police surveillance.

I beg you to heed my request to my petition. J. Djugashvili. 23 November 1901” [9] (Used by Montefiore in Young Stalin on page 105, in the chapter titled The Prisoner) It is the abundance of new sources that has allowed historians not to rely on myth as a means of approaching personality as Deutscher was forced too. In turn the interpretations of Stalin have changed

and can be directly related once again to the influx of new source material and documentation. Final note

The biographers interpretation of Stalin is the end result of his method and his method is formulated to compliment his sources; thus the interpretations biographers over time reach are products of their time and of what information was available to them. Its with an abundance of souces existing today that allows current biograhers to cover the psychology and myths; the youth and personality and the politics and policy of Stalin and to do so in a synchronic fashion that of which Deutscher could not.