



Chapter Two

The Four Faces of Stalin

Background

Stalin was capable of incredible cruelty. He was of medium height; his face was scarred by smallpox; he waddled when he walked; and he continually sucked on his pipe. He had incredible patience; he spoke simply with a strong Georgian accent. He lacked humor and was not known to joke. According to his former secretary, who defected to the West in the 1920s: “He had only one passion, absolute and devouring: lust for power. It was a maniacal passion, that of an Asian satrap of long ago. It occupied him entirely and was the unique goal of his life.”¹ Stalin had no close friends; his immediate political associates served as his social circle, at Stalin’s beck and call. They were bound to him by fear rather than friendship.

This chapter shows four different faces of Stalin, four different modes of behavior all directed toward his overriding goal of gaining and holding on to absolute power. There is the solicitous, magnanimous, and jocular Stalin. There is the reluctant Stalin, required to do unpleasant things because it is the party’s wish. There is the Stalin applying praise and flattery with cynical cruelty. Finally, there is the true Stalin, directly carrying out acts of cruelty without any pangs of morality or remorse.



Stalin at the hunt with his comrades.

Face 1: The Magnanimous Stalin

Stalin knew how to use charm and flattery when necessary. Most of his letters to his deputies were matter of fact, but he would also express concern about their health or their fatigue from hard work and send greetings to their wives (“Greetings from Nadia [Stalin’s wife] to Zhemchuzhina [Molotov’s wife whom Stalin later arrested]”).² He composed witty poems “dedicated to [Politburo member] Comrade Kalinin,” and invited colleagues to visit him in Sochi [To Sergo Ordzhonikidze: “It is good that you have decided on a vacation. Come to me along the way. I would be very glad.”].³

Much of Stalin’s efforts from the mid-1920s through the early thirties were devoted to keeping Politburo members on his side and settling conflicts among them. Stalin had to work out compromises before personal conflicts threatened his coalition. He also had to keep his policy initiatives—collectivization and industrialization—on tar-

get, and he knew that praise of subordinates was a potent motivator. He met regularly with leading officials in his private office. We have no transcripts of such meetings, but we presume Stalin used them to bully or to charm. We can find traces of his charm offensives in his correspondence.

Stalin's use of flattery and praise is evident in a 1939 telegram to the director of Far North Construction (a Comrade K. A. Pavlov)—a Gulag division that employed tens of thousands of prisoners mining precious metals under the harshest of climatic conditions.

In his telegram, Stalin magnanimously chides Pavlov for not nominating himself for a medal of "Labor Valor." He also gives Pavlov the privilege to decide himself whom to award medals among his managers and workers, including prisoners.

Ciphered Telegram of I.V. Stalin to K.A. Pavlov [Director of Far North Construction, Dal'stroi] concerning the rewarding of workers, January 24, 1939.⁴

Magadan. Dalstroi, to Pavlov

I received the list of those to be rewarded. I regard your list as incomplete; you approached this matter too cautiously and too miserly. In this list you have not included yourself and other members of the top management. Let us reward all, starting with Pavlov, without embarrassment or false modesty. Add another 150-200 persons including several tens of prisoners who have distinguished themselves at work. Remember that the medal "For Labor Valor" is higher than the medal "For Labor Distinction." I don't need any of the details of those to be rewarded. Just send me the names for each type of medal. The list of those freed from prior convictions remains in effect and you can expand it. I am awaiting the general list." Signed, STALIN

Stalin's motivation for this telegram was to raise morale and provide more incentives to a manager operating in a difficult environment. Ten days before his telegram to Pavlov, Stalin reprimanded the local paper *Soviet Kolyma* for criticizing Pavlov's Magadan operation, saying the criticism "does not take into account the difficult conditions of work and the specific conditions of work of Pavlov. Your criticism of Pavlov is unfounded demagoguery. Your newspaper should help Pavlov and not place spokes in the wheel."⁵ On the next

day, Stalin sent Pavlov a telegram asking him for a list of names of those to be honored.⁶

One can imagine the effect of receiving such a telegram from the supreme and mythical leader, who you thought did not even know of your existence. It also served a practical purpose. It allowed Pavlov to run his mammoth enterprise without newspaper and party officials looking over his shoulder. Stalin's letter of praise was an insurance policy to preserve his job and his life.

Face 2: The Bowing-to-the-Will-of-the-Party Stalin

Except in unguarded moments, there was the fiction that Stalin's orders were never his own but were those of the Central Committee. Stalin's orders were written on Central Committee stationery, sometimes with "J. Stalin" at the bottom but often without a signature.

Among the many victims of Stalin's purge of the party elite was the party boss of Kiev and candidate member of the Politburo, Pavel Postyshev. Postyshev was removed as Kiev party secretary in January of 1937. Stalin reserved Postyshev's fate for the January 1938 Central Committee Plenum, transcripts of which were distributed widely among party members.

The Plenum turned into an unscheduled attack on Postyshev. A series of Stalin cronies condemned him as "bankrupt" and "making crude mistakes for which the party must judge him." Stalin remained silent throughout. At the end, Postyshev was given a chance to repent and begged for mercy:

I ask the plenum of the Central Committee to forgive me. I never consorted with enemies but I always have battled along with the party against enemies of the people with my whole Bolshevik soul. I made many mistakes, but I did not understand them.

Party members, reading the transcript, would conclude that Stalin was simply carrying out the wishes of others as he summed up the proceeding using the passive tense:

Here in the Presidium of the Central Committee or in the Politburo, as you wish, the opinion has been formed, that after all that has happened,

it is necessary to take some kind of measures in association with Comrade Postyshev. And it seems as if the following opinion has formed, that it is necessary to remove him as a candidate member of the Politburo, leaving him as a member of the Central Committee.⁷

Postyshev's case was turned over to the party control commission, which recommended his expulsion. Shortly thereafter he was arrested and shot.

Face 3: Stalin the Cynical Flatterer

Stalin could also use the pretext of flattery and charm with extreme cynicism and cruelty on friend and foe alike. On September 25, 1936, Stalin bluntly informed the Politburo that Genrykh Iagoda should be removed as head of the NKVD ("Iagoda is clearly not up to the task . . . "). On the next day, he composed the following memo demoting Iagoda to Minister of Communications:

Comrade Iagoda:

The Ministry of Communications is a very important matter. This is a defense ministry. I do not doubt that you will be able to put it back on its feet. I very much ask you to agree to the work in the Ministry of Communications. Without a good minister we feel as if we are missing our hands. It is not possible to leave the Ministry of Communications in its current situation.⁸

The memo was read [not clear by Stalin or by someone else] from Sochi to Iagoda on the same day at 21:30. Iagoda understood that this memo, which outsiders would interpret as praise, meant the end of his political career and ultimately his life.

It is a puzzle why Stalin engaged in the charade of asking Iagoda "to agree" to the new post and of telling him that without him there it would be like "missing our hands." It could either have satisfied Stalin's enjoyment of mental torture or it could be out of caution. As head of the NKVD, Iagoda had at his disposal special troops and secret agents. Perhaps Stalin thought that flattering words would make Iagoda go quietly.

Iagoda waited six months for his fate to be sealed in a March 31, 1937, Politburo decree:

In view of the uncovered anti-Soviet and criminal activities of the minister of communication Iagoda, carried out during his work as commissar of the NKVD and also after his transfer to the ministry of communications, the Politburo considers it necessary to exclude him from the party and from the Central Committee and order his immediate arrest.⁹

Iagoda was convicted of espionage and other offenses in March of 1938 and was immediately executed and his body put on display of the grounds of his former dacha.

Face 4: The Unadulterated Stalin

Unlike Hitler's Nazi regime, there was no reluctance on the part of Stalin or his associates to sign death sentences. Stalin's files are full of matter-of-fact approvals of death sentences suggested by subordinates or by his own requests for capital punishments. There are literally hundreds of execution orders signed by Stalin, and they can be broken down into approvals of mass executions, approvals of executions of specific persons, or orders to begin cases or campaigns that will result in executions.

A few examples:¹⁰

Coded telegram to Comrade Andreev in Saratov:

The Central Committee agrees with your proposal to bring the former workers of Machine Tractor Station No. 1138 to the courts and execute them.—STALIN, July 28, 1937.

Coded telegram to all Party Secretaries:

Considering it essential for the political mobilization of collective farmers in favor of destroying enemies in agriculture, the Central Committee requires party organizations to organize in every province and region two to three open show trials of enemies of the people and widely publicize the course of these trials in the local press.—STALIN, August 3, 1937.

To the Smolensk Party Committee:

I advise you to sentence the wreckers of the Andreevskii region to death and publish this in the local press.—STALIN, August 27, 1937.

Extract from the Central Committee minutes:

On the question of the NKVD: To approve the proposal of the Central Committee of Kazakhstan to increase the number of repressed counter-revolutionary elements in Kazakhstan of the first category [automatic death sentence] by 900 and the second category [automatic Gulag sentences] by 3,500, in all 4,400 persons.—SECRETARY OF CENTRAL COMMITTEE [Stalin], December 15, 1937.

To regional Party Secretaries (coded):

In association with the trial of spies and wreckers Tukhachevskii, Uborevich [two respected marshals of the Soviet army], and others, the Central Committee proposes that you organize meetings of workers, and where possible peasants, and also meetings of Red Army units to issue resolutions about the necessity of death sentences. The trial should end this evening. The communication about the sentence [death] will be published tomorrow, that is June 12.—SECRETARY OF CENTRAL COMMITTEE. Stalin, June 11, 1937.

Although these examples relate to the years of the Great Terror, Stalin had been issuing death sentences since the 1920s. For example, in a letter to his deputy Molotov dated August 16, 1929, Stalin ordered “two to three dozen wreckers from the finance ministry and state bank” to be shot, including “common cashiers.” In the same letter, he ordered “a whole group of wreckers in the meat industry must definitely be shot.”¹¹

Although Stalin probably received pleasure from killing his personal rivals, his execution orders were calculated and ordered for a purpose, with Stalin even managing the associated public relations. Village executions taught that the countryside was filled with evil enemies anxious to destroy the achievements of collective agriculture. Increased execution limits signalled that Stalin welcomed more executions in the regions. The public demonstrations demanding the death of Marshals Tukhachevskii and Uborevich were to demonstrate that

the death sentences that Stalin had ordered were demanded by the people, and not by Stalin (even though the demonstrations came after the execution sentence). The execution of cashiers was to shift blame for shortages to “evil wreckers” infiltrating the banks.

Dictators and Manners

Stalin gave a first impression of a humble man, a loner, who talked in practical terms, and who lived a simple life. Yet, he could not have attracted to him loyal associates if he lacked social skills. After he achieved absolute power, he could afford to drop his polite approach to his associates, but he could still attract devoted followers. His influence on his ill-fated NKVD head, Nikolai Ezhov, became “total, unlimited, almost hypnotic.”¹² Hitler possessed many of the same characteristics. He had excellent manners, lived a simple life, and had the power to charm and attract associates. Like Stalin, he alternated between reasonable discourse and ranting. Hitler truly hated the Jews and “inferior” Slavic races. Stalin truly hated enemies of socialism, which he defined as anyone opposed to him.

Hitler may have resembled Lenin more than Stalin in the fact that he was an armchair executioner. Lenin, while demanding the killing of enemies of Bolshevik power, never pulled the trigger himself. He turned such matters over to fervent subordinates. Lenin was even known as an easy touch for relatives petitioning to commute death sentences. Stalin, on the other hand, personally orchestrated executions and made sure that they went according to his directions. Even when his health did not allow him to actively direct the state and the economy, Stalin continued to read and direct interrogations of political enemies.

What was unique about Stalin and Hitler is that no one anticipated the extent to which they were prepared to carry their brutality. Stalin’s decision to liquidate the richer peasants as a class in 1929 brought gasps from the assembled party elite. No one could have known that he would physically annihilate the party elite in the wake of the mysterious assassination of Leningrad party boss Sergei Kirov in December of 1934. Most Germans and many German Jews assumed that Hitler’s rhetoric about the Jewish problem was simply words. Stalin took the apparatus of terror created under Lenin, and

refined and modified it, but the basic principles of political repression were already in place under Lenin. Stalin's innovation was to apply repression on a scale unimaginable to the first Bolsheviks, which is illustrated in the following Soviet joke, an imagined conversation between Lenin and Stalin:

LENIN: Comrade Stalin, would you sacrifice 10,000 for the Socialist Revolution?

STALIN: Yes, without hesitation.

LENIN: I would as well.

LENIN: Comrade Stalin, would you sacrifice 500,000 for the Socialist Revolution?

STALIN: Yes, without hesitation.

LENIN: I would as well.

LENIN: Comrade Stalin, would you sacrifice ten million for the Socialist Revolution?

STALIN: Yes, without hesitation.

LENIN: You see, Comrade Stalin, in such matters you and I are quite different.