



Chapter Six

A Tale of Two Sons

Yakov and Vasilii Dzhugashvili (Stalin)

Background

As in many families, Stalin's two sons were a study in contrast. His first, Yakov, was born in March of 1907 to Stalin's first wife, who died in the same year. His second son, Vasilii, was born in 1921 to his second wife, Nadezhda, who committed suicide when Vasilii was eleven. Both went by the family name of Dzhugashvili.

The elder, Yakov, was introverted, brooding, and sullen. His relationship with his distant and critical father was stormy; a failed suicide attempt prompted only scorn from his father. The younger, Vasilii, and his sister, Svetlana, were raised by nurses and security guards; Vasilii scarcely saw his father. Vasilii was happy-go-lucky, a prankster, a poor student, a bon vivant who enjoyed women, cars, and drinking—the opposite in most respects to his austere father.

During the Second World War, or the Great Patriotic War, as the Russians call it, both sons served in the military, the thirty-four-year-old Yakov as a senior lieutenant and the twenty-year-old Vasilii as a pilot in the Soviet air force. Despite Vasilii's bad grades, he was admitted to a prestigious training school for pilots through the intervention of NKVD head Lavrenty Beria.

Lieutenant Yakov Dzhugashvili was captured by the Nazis in 1941. Aware that he was Stalin's son, the Nazis offered Yakov in exchange

for a German general, a deal Stalin dismissed out of hand as an unfair exchange. Unfortunately for Yakov and for millions of other captured Russians, Stalin believed all captured soldiers were traitors. Yakov disappeared into a German concentration camp, his fate unclear at war's end.

The younger Vasilii's wartime career had a brighter ending. He served as a commander of an LA-7 group and flew 961 missions and took part in fifteen air battles, according to his evaluation of 1945. By the war's end, the twenty-four-year-old Vasilii had risen to the rank of air force colonel and was a recipient of the Medal of the Red Banner. He had before him a promising military career. Although his father took no steps to advance his career, Vasilii's superiors took no chances. Vasilii became accustomed to receiving favorable treatment—a habit that lasted throughout his lifetime.

This is the story of Stalin's two sons as told by their files in the Central Committee archives.¹ Neither story ends well. Yakov's ends with his dead body stretched across the barbed wire of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Vasilii's ends with his death from alcoholism in 1962 in a provincial town, after years of prison and disgrace.

Yakov

At war's end, the fate of POW Yakov Dzhugashvili remained unclear, although there were rumors that he had been sent to a concentration camp and had died there. The Nazis would have wanted to keep such a high-profile captive alive, even if his father (Stalin) had refused offers of an exchange. Maybe Stalin would have a change of heart.

Despite Stalin's apparent indifference to his son's fate, the NKVD conducted an investigation from its headquarters in occupied Berlin at war's end. Deputy minister Ivan Serov summarized the results of his investigation into Yakov's fate in a six-page report from Berlin sent on September 14, 1946, to be read "only personally" by his boss, NKVD head Kruglov. There is no information in the files as to whether this report was passed on to Stalin. Kruglov rarely met with Stalin in person; therefore, he would have reported the results to Stalin in writing. Whether he did tell Stalin will remain unknown.

Serov established that Yakov had indeed been transferred to the



Photograph of Yakov Dzhughashvili (Stalin's son) in German captivity.

Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The former chief of guards of Sachsenhausen, a Gustav Wegner, confirmed that there was a special camp for generals and other highly placed Russian officers within the confines of the Sachsenhausen camp. It was in these special barracks that Yakov was held along with a relative of Molotov. Wegner remembered Yakov well and reported a number of conversations with him. Yakov's only request for special treatment was for newspapers, and he never gave his last name. He kept himself apart from other prisoners and appeared in a depressed state. At the end of 1943, Wegner was informed that Yakov had been killed by guards while attempting to escape. Wegner could not (or did not want to) recount the exact circumstances because the investigation was conducted under the lead of Gestapo chief Heinrich Himmler.

The NKVD's interrogation of the camp commander (a Colonel Kainel) also confirmed that Senior Lieutenant Dzugashvili was held three weeks in the camp prison and then, at Himmler's directive, was transferred to the special camp, consisting of three barracks surrounded by a brick wall and high-voltage barbed wire. Kainel reported, consistent with the chief of guards, that Yakov was a solitary figure who shunned contact with other prisoners.

The camp commander reported the circumstances of Yakov's death as follows: The inmates of barrack number 2 were allowed to walk in the early evening in the area outside their barracks. At 7:00 P.M., the SS guards ordered them to return to their barracks. All obeyed except Dzhugashvili, who demanded to see the camp commander. The guard's repeated order went unheeded. As the SS guard telephoned the camp commander, he heard a shot and hung up. Dzhugashvili, in a state of agitation, had run across the neutral zone to the barbed wire. The guard raised his rifle ordering him to stop, but Dzhugashvili kept on going. The guard warned that he was going to shoot; Dzhugashvili cursed, grabbed for the barbed-wire gate, and shouted at the guard to shoot. The guard shot him in the head and killed him.

Clearly the unauthorized shooting of none other than Stalin's son set off great apprehension in Sachsenhausen. He had been transferred in by Himmler himself, who hoped to use him as a pawn of some sort. Now, Stalin's son was dead, and no one knew what the consequences would be. Dzhugashvili's body lay stretched across the barbed wire for twenty-four hours while the camp awaited orders from Himmler. The

Gestapo sent two professors to the scene who prepared a document stating that Dzhugashvili was killed by electrocution and that the shot to the head followed. The document stated that the guard acted properly. Dzhugashvili's body was then burned, and the urn with his ashes was sent to the Gestapo headquarters. Indeed, it seemed irrelevant whether Yakov was killed by electrocution or by the bullet. Either way, it was he who committed suicide.

Serov's NKVD interrogators asked for and got an accurate physical description of Dzhugashvili from the camp commander and chief of guards, who also identified him through photographs.

Serov's report ends on a suspicious note that sends a chilling message about NKVD interrogation methods:

In the course of the investigation it was established that the commandant SS Colonel Kainel and the commander of the guards, SS Lieutenant Colonel Wegner, are not telling everything they know, fearing they will be charged with crimes associated with Sachsenhausen. We have established their intent to commit suicide by attacking the guards or by jumping to their deaths. When we got charge of the former officers of the SS Camp Sachsenhausen from the Americans, they asked us to turn them over to the court. For this reason, we are not able to apply the full measure of physical intervention [the code word for torture] to Kainel and Wegner. But we did organize to have a mole in their cells.

Vasilii

Vasilii Dzhugashvili (aka Vasilii Stalin) started his active military service in the 16th Aviation Division. His advancement was rapid, from inspector in the air force general staff, to major, and then to colonel. By war's end he was a general. He was then promoted to head the air force's Moscow Military District as a major general. He was demoted by his father from this post in 1952, according to the Central Committee files, for his loose lifestyle and his constant drinking, but he remained in the rank of general.

Although Stalin took no recorded steps to help his son's career, the Stalin name served as a strong shield that evaporated when his father died in March of 1953. Vasilii was arrested on April 29, 1953, one and a half months after his father's death. MVD chief Lavrenty Beria,

who had intervened on Vasiliï's behalf before, was arrested by Stalin's successors in June of 1953 and could provide no further assistance.

The MVD was placed in charge of Vasiliï's interrogation. The head of the MVD, Kruglov, informed the Politburo on August 8, 1953, that Vasiliï Dzhugashvili had confessed to the charges against him, which included:

Illegal expenditures, theft and diversion for own use of state property and money, forcing subordinates into such illegal acts. In addition, he allowed hostile attacks and engaged in defamatory remarks against the leadership of the party and also expressed his intent to establish ties with foreign correspondents to give interviews about his situation after the death of his father.

Kruglov also reported that Vasiliï tried to enlist Beria's help: "In the course of the past month. V.I. Stalin more than once requested his interrogators to make arrangements for a meeting with Beria, justifying this request that he wanted to know the Soviet government's decision concerning his fate." Vasiliï was obviously isolated or else he would have known that Beria himself had already been arrested. He probably requested the meeting in the hope that Beria could bail him out of a difficult situation.

Vasiliï's interrogation was conducted from May 9 to 11, 1953, by the notorious head and deputy head of "the investigations division for especially important matters of the ministry of interior." His much-feared interrogators, Vlodzimirskii and Kozlov, were themselves to be arrested shortly as part of Beria's retinue.

It appears that Vasiliï's interrogators did not have to push hard for his confession. He seemed to relish the recounting of his crimes and misdeeds as commander of the Moscow Military District. Most of his crimes relate to high living and expenditure of military funds to support his sports and hunting hobbies. Vasiliï's tone is that of a school boy confessing his pranks to the school principal, as the following excerpts show:

Besides that, my improper conduct expressed itself in systematic drunkenness, sexual encounters with women subordinated to me, and other types of scandalous activities.

In the period from 1947 to 1949, I formed teams of champions in about all types of sports: horseback riding, hockey, motorcycle racing, ice skating, basketball, gymnastics, swimming, and water polo. Besides that I succeeded in gaining the transfer from the air force of its football team. There were more than three hundred athletes in these teams, whose cost was more than five million rubles per year. In connection with organizing the equestrian and motorcycle teams, I ordered three hangars in the central airport to be rebuilt at the expenses of the Moscow military district. One was for the riding hall, the other for horse stables, and the third for motorcycles.

QUESTION: Did you recruit athletes from those serving in the military?

ANSWER: No. There were no military personnel on these teams. They were put together from professional athletes and, according to my command, were taken from other sports teams. . . . In order to attract [a noted athlete by the name of] Starostin, I not only paid him and his wife, but I also arranged a Moscow living permit, which I knew that he, having a criminal record, did not have the right to have. When the militia refused the permit, I ordered my adjutant to settle him in the hunting society of the military district. After a while, Starostin was caught by the militia in his wife's apartment and was told to leave Moscow immediately. Knowing that Starostin had left Moscow, I ordered the former head of counter-intelligence of the military district and his adjutant to commandeer an airplane to overtake his train and bring him to my apartment.

Vasilii's confession proceeds with more tales, which remind one of the exploits of a crooked politician:

In 1950 I named the caretaker of my dacha as deputy coach of the hockey team. Also the teachers of my children were paid by the sports team. I also invited artists from Sochi to do artistic renovations of my dacha and apartment, paying them as hockey coaches of the highest qualification. My personal chauffeurs and even my mistress were paid as swimming coaches although they did nothing of the sort. Persons who worked as my personal servants were paid monthly salaries up to [the princely sum of] two thousand rubles, and they were given apartments in military housing and high quality military clothing destined for pilots and other air force personnel.

QUESTION: Tell us about the hunting society and for what it was created.

ANSWER: The 'hunting society' was created by me in 1948 in a location closed to outsiders on my orders. The 'society' covered a territory of 55,000 hectares. I ordered the construction of three homes and the reconstruction of a narrow-gauge railway, for which a special trolley car was built. I ordered from hunting preserves twenty five-point deer at a cost of 80,000 rubles, and we also got, I don't know from where, beavers and white partridges. Within the Moscow military district, we organized a 'special administration' of the hunting society, the head of which was a reserve captain, who was counted as a coach of the football team. Another nine were listed on various sports teams, including the wife of my dacha caretaker, who was listed as a gymnastics instructor. In actual practice, the entire administration and also the professional hunters and armed guard did nothing because I was there only two times, and no one else was allowed. If an actual hunter had shown up, the guards would have confiscated his weapon and sent him away. I flew to the hunting society in my own airplane accompanied by friends and servants. Another airplane was dispatched to a nearby airport to bring in food, vodka and wine because we were staying several days.

The above excerpts touch only the surface of Vasiliï's misuse of state funds, and worse, of military funds for his own use. Other parts of his confession speak to his yachts, foreign automobiles, mistresses, use of foreign exchange, and so on. Clearly, Vasiliï Dzhugashvili's interrogators had more than enough to convict him. Although most of his confession related to misuse of state funds, the most serious charges against him were his threats to speak out against the new leadership and to contact the foreign press. It is for this reason that Vasiliï Dzhugashvili's eight-year sentence was under the infamous Article 58 of the Russian criminal code for counter-revolutionary offenses.

The sentencing of a personage like Stalin's son required considerable deliberation at the highest levels. Vasiliï was sentenced on September 2, 1955, (two years after his arrest) by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court to eight years of prison on charges of counter-revolutionary activity and theft of state funds.

At this point in the story, Vasiliï disappears into a Soviet prison.

Clemency Denied

The Soviet state again addressed Vasilii Dzhugashvili's case on January 5, 1960, after his having served six years and eight months. At that time, prison authorities had reported him as a good prisoner and there was concern about his deteriorating health (heart disease, stomach disorders, and other problems).

Nikita Khrushchev was apparently ready to consider clemency and turned to the head of the KGB and the chief prosecutor for their joint recommendation. The proposed terms were quite generous. Vasilii was to be "granted a partial amnesty, freeing him from the rest of his sentence and the Moscow city government was to be charged to give him a three-room apartment and the ministry of defense was to give him a pension in accordance with the law, along with three months in a sanatorium, to return the personal property taken from him at the time of his arrest, and to give him a one-time payment of 30,000 rubles." The Presidium of the Central Committee appeared ready to accept this proposal and prepared a draft decree on this point on January 8, 1960.

It was probably Vasilii's stubbornness that cost him this generous amnesty. There are no documents on his case between January 8, 1960, and his scheduled release on April 28, 1961. We imagine that Vasilii, when presented with the earlier amnesty proposal, demanded full rehabilitation and restoration to the rank of general—terms the leaders of the Soviet Union could not accept.

The next-to-last memo in the file, dated April 7, 1961, is again from the chief prosecutor and the head of the KGB, written three weeks before Vasilii's scheduled release. The frustrated memo makes clear that Vasilii has been a major irritant. The terms of his release have become more severe. Vasilii has not "corrected himself," acts in a "dark fashion," and "demands special privileges for himself which he had during the life of his father."

Clearly, the Soviet leadership feared that Vasilii would be a loose cannon if allowed to stay in Moscow. Better to bury him in a closed provincial city. When told that he would be sent to Kazan or Kuibyshev, he asserted that he would not voluntarily live anywhere but Moscow. He rejected the proposal to change his name and threatened that if not given appropriate conditions (dacha, apartment, pension,

and so forth), “he would not keep quiet, but would tell everyone that he was convicted without foundation and was treated arbitrarily.” After his release, Vasiliï threatened to meet with N. S. Khrushchev and other members of the Presidium, inform the appropriate offices about his mistreatment, and perhaps ask the Chinese embassy to send him to China, where he could recover his health.

His threat to appeal to the Chinese was not received as an idle one. At the time, the Chinese under Mao were disturbed about Khrushchev’s “defamation” of Stalin in his 1956 secret speech. Having Stalin’s own son under Chinese wings would have been a powerful propaganda tool in the setting of worsening Sino-Soviet relations. Vasiliï’s threat to contact foreign journalists also had to be taken seriously. Having a drunken and “dark” son of Stalin spouting off to the international press could have harmed Soviet interests.

What to do with such an ornery person? The verdict: “Because of these actions, we propose to exile him to Kazan (a city where no foreigners are allowed), as an exception to existing legislation. In Kazan, he will be given a single one-room apartment.”

The banished Vasiliï Dzhugashvili would not be an irritant for long. The KGB reported to Khrushchev on March 9, 1962, that Dzhugashvili (Stalin) Vasiliï Iosifovich had died in Kazan earlier that day. “According to preliminary information, the cause of death was alcohol abuse. V. I. Dzhugashvili, despite multiple warnings of his doctor, was systematically drunk. We consider it wise to bury V. I. Dzhugashvili in Kazan without military honors. We request permission to inform his closest relatives. Signed V. Semichastny, Head of the KGB.”

Vasiliï Dzhugashvili was partially rehabilitated in 1999, when the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court lifted charges of anti-Soviet propaganda that dated from 1953. His body was re-buried in a Moscow cemetery in 2002.

Why No Stalin Dynasty?

The stories of Stalin’s two sons are tragic. Both ended badly. Both suffered from Stalin’s bullying and neglect. Vasiliï became attached to privileges that his father’s subordinates showered on him, and his stubborn insistence that he deserved them caused trouble to the very end. Had he been better behaved and more predictable, the post-Stalin

leaderships might have looked the other way with respect to his theft of state property. Deep down, Soviet authorities feared the adverse publicity that an unpredictable son of Stalin could bring down on them.

There is another angle to the story of Stalin's sons to consider: Why did their father not groom them to take over after he was gone? In many cases (Duvalier in Haiti and Aliev in Azerbaijan), dictators extend their reign beyond their natural life spans through their sons. Stalin's handling of his sons makes clear that he had no intention of grooming them as successors. Why was this so? We can only speculate, but it seems clear that Stalin made sure that there would be no consideration of successors during his lifetime. He left it to his successors to fight for his position, just as he had fought to succeed Lenin. Whenever rumors circulated that a particular party leader was a likely successor, Stalin brutally cut them down to size. For those who showed independent initiative and ability, Stalin had them killed.

An able and ambitious son of Stalin would have been considered by Stalin as a threat to his power, and Stalin's primary goal was unlimited and unbridled power. It may even have been true that Stalin, through abuse and indifference, made sure that no son of his would ever be considered as a potential successor.