Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, Ceaușescu, Mengistu of Ethiopia and Duvalier of Haiti.

No dictator can rule through fear and violence alone. Naked power can be grabbed and held temporarily, but it never suffices in the long term. The paradox of the modern dictator is that he must create the illusion of popular support.

Frank Dikötter returns to some of the most chillingly effective personality cults of the twentieth century. From carefully choreographed parades to the deliberate cultivation of mystery through iron censorship, these dictators ceaselessly worked on their own image and encouraged the population to glorify them. At a time when democracy is in retreat, are we seeing a return to the same techniques among some of today's world leaders?

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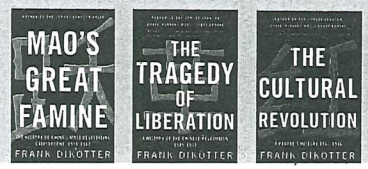

MAO'S GREAT FAMINE

HOW TO BE A DICTATOR

THE CULT OF PERSONALITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

FRANK DIKÖTTER

fight to continue, determined to bring death and destruction to a nation that did not deserve him.[99]

On 20 April 1945, Hitler's fifty-sixth birthday, the first enemy shell hit Berlin. Bombardment was relentless. Two days later nothing but a white façade standing amidst smoking rubble was left of the Ministry of Propaganda. Old and trusted associates began deserting the sinking ship, Heinrich Himmler and Hermann Goering among them. Hitler shot himself on 30 April. He had heard of Mussolini's undignified end and had ordered that his remains be incinerated to prevent any desecration. His body, together with that of Eva Braun, his long-term mistress whom he had married a day earlier, was dragged out of the bunker, doused in petrol and set alight.

A wave of suicides followed among the most committed Nazis, including the entire Goebbels family, Heinrich Himmler, Bernhard Rust and Robert Ley. Thousands of ordinary people also killed themselves. As soon as the Red Army arrived, a Protestant clergyman reported, 'whole good, churchgoing families took their lives, drowned themselves, slit their wrists or allowed themselves to be burned up along with their homes'. But the Führer's death prompted no spontaneous displays of public grief, no outpouring of sorrow by distraught believers. 'Strange,' one woman reported from Hamburg after the radio announced Hitler's death, 'nobody wept or even looked sad.' A young man who had long wondered how his countrymen would react to the death of their leader was astonished by the 'monumental, yawning indifference' that followed the radio announcement. The Third Reich, Victor Klemperer observed, was gone overnight, almost as good as forgotten.[100]

All resistance collapsed the moment Hitler died. Expecting the same ferocious partisan war they had fought at home, Red Army officers were taken aback by the docility of the population. They were also surprised by the number of people who produced communist flags out of scarlet Nazi banners with the swastika cut from the centre. In Berlin this turnabout was referred to as 'Heil Stalin!'.[101]

3

Stalin

'Everywhere in Moscow one sees nothing but Lenin,' the French journalist Henri Béraud observed in 1924, a few months after the death of the communist revolutionary and head of state. 'Lenin posters, Lenin drawings, Lenin mosaics, Lenin scorched in pokerwork, Lenin in linoleum, Lenin inkwells, Lenin desk blotters. Entire shops devoted to selling his bust, in every size, every material and every price, from bronze, marble, stone, porcelain and alabaster to plaster. And that does not include pictures of Lenin, from formal portraits to lively snapshots and newsreels.' Lenin, Béraud ventured, was probably the most photographed head of state – after Mussolini.[1]

Even before Lenin died his comrades had begun glorifying him. In August 1918 a disillusioned revolutionary called Fanny Kaplan approached Lenin as he was leaving the Hammer and Sickle Factory in Moscow. She fired several shots. One bullet lodged in his neck; another went through his left shoulder. Against all odds, he survived. 'Only those marked by destiny can escape death from such a wound,' his physician remarked. Eulogies to the great leader followed, printed and distributed in hundreds of thousands of copies. Leon Trotsky, founder and commander of the Red Army, praised him as a 'masterpiece created by nature' for a 'new era in human history', the 'embodiment of revolutionary thinking'. Nikolai Bukharin, editor of the party newspaper *Pravda*, wrote

about 'the genius leader of the world revolution', the man with an 'almost prophetic ability to predict'.[2]

Lenin recovered and put a halt to the outpouring, but when poor health finally forced him to withdraw from public appearances in 1922 the cult took on new life. The Bolsheviks, like the fascists and the Nazis, were a party held together not so much by a programme or platform but by a chosen leader. It was Lenin's will, vision and, most of all, intuition that had guided the revolution, rather than the communist principles proposed by Marx half a century earlier. Lenin was the embodiment of the revolution. If he could no longer lead in person, then his followers had to invoke his name or claim direct inspiration from his revolutionary spirit.[3]

The deification of Lenin also served as a substitute for a popular mandate. Even at the height of their popularity in November 1917 the Bolsheviks won less than a quarter of the vote. They used violence to seize power, and the more power they acquired the fiercer the violence became. Fanny Kaplan's assassination attempt was followed by a Red Terror, as the regime systematically targeted whole groups of people, from striking factory workers to peasants who deserted the Red Army. Thousands of priests and nuns, declared class enemies after the revolution, were killed, some crucified, castrated, buried alive or thrown into cauldrons of boiling tar. The entire imperial family was shot or stabbed to death, their bodies mutilated, burned and dumped in a pit. If violence alienated many ordinary people, neither the abstract language of 'class struggle' nor the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', foreign words that villagers in a largely illiterate countryside could barely pronounce, won them over. Appeals to the leader as a holy figure, on the other hand, were far more successful in creating at least the illusion of some sort of bond between the state and its seventy million subjects.[4]

Lenin did not name a successor, but in 1922 he hand-picked Stalin for the new post of General Secretary as a means of reining in Trotsky, who opposed the New Economic Policy spearheaded by Lenin. The policy effectively reversed the forced collectivisation introduced after the revolution, when factory workers had been ordered to produce by decree, their goods confiscated by the state.

Christened war communism, this system had left the economy in ruins. The New Economic Policy moved back towards the market, allowing individuals to operate small enterprises. Forced grain requisitions ceased, replaced by a tax on agricultural produce. Trotsky came to view the New Economic Policy as a surrender to capitalists and rich peasants, and demanded instead an even greater role for the state in the economy.

Stalin acquired great powers as General Secretary, despite possessing obvious defects. He was no great orator, speaking with a thick Georgian accent in a voice that carried poorly. He lacked any sense of timing. He performed with an almost complete absence of gesture. And, unlike many of his colleagues, he lacked the aura of a revolutionary who had spent years abroad in exile. He could write fluently, but was not an outstanding theoretician who could expound on communist doctrine. Stalin made the best of his shortcomings, presenting himself as a modest servant devoted to promoting the greater good while others were constantly seeking the limelight.

He described himself as a *praktik*, a practical man of action rather than an exponent of the revolution. By all accounts he had exceptional organisational abilities, a huge capacity for work and great strength of will. His rivals often dismissed him as a mere administrator, 'the outstanding mediocrity of our party', as Trotsky phrased it. But Stalin was a cunning, unscrupulous operator who exploited other people's weaknesses to turn them into willing accomplices. He was also a gifted strategic thinker with a genuine political touch. Like Hitler, he showed concern for the people around him, regardless of their position in the hierarchy, remembering their names and past conversations. He also knew how to bide his time.[5]

As Lenin convalesced, Stalin became his intermediary, using his new powers to draw closer to the leader. But the relationship was tempestuous, and in 1923 the two fell out. The ailing leader dictated a series of notes that became known as Lenin's Testament, a document suggesting that Stalin had a crude temperament and should be removed from the post of General Secretary.

Alive Lenin was a threat, dead an asset. The moment Lenin passed away on 21 January 1924 Stalin became determined to pose as his most faithful pupil. He was the first among the inner circle to enter his master's bedroom, theatrically taking the dead man's head in both hands to bring it close to his chest, kissing him firmly on the cheeks and on the lips.[6]

For several weeks Lenin's embalmed corpse was displayed in a glass catafalque on Red Square, where the winter cold kept his body intact. The party was divided over what to do next. Russia had a long tradition of mummifying its holy men. In the Monastery of Caves in Kiev, where reclusive monks used to worship before the revolution, the catacombs were lined with dozens of saints, their faces blackened, their emaciated hands resting on ragged, dusty clothes. Comparable treatment for the revolutionary leader carried religious overtones that clashed with the atheist outlook of several leaders, including Lenin's wife. Felix Dzerzhinsky, as chair of the funeral commission, prevailed, with the backing of the General Secretary. Lenin, in death as in life, was to serve the cause of the working class, as millions would come to pay their respects before his coffin.[7]

Once spring arrived a few months later a team of scientists took Lenin's body away and set about experimenting with chemicals to prevent its decomposition. In August 1924 Lenin reappeared, his whitened, marble-like body displayed in a more permanent mausoleum. It attracted long queues of worshippers, patient, poor, mystical, the same crowd, noted Henri Béraud, that could be seen 'muttering its prayers in front of gilded icons and candles burning with a yellow flame'.[8]

Having captured Lenin's corpse, Stalin set about asserting ownership over his words. He took the Lenin Institute under his wing, overseeing the publication of all significant Lenin documents. But Lenin's collected writings did not define a doctrine. By delivering a series of lectures on Leninism, serialised in *Pravda* under the title 'Foundations of Leninism', Stalin staked his claim as guardian of his master's legacy. Leninism, he wrote, was the Marxism of the imperial age, and Lenin the sole great heir of Marx and Engels.[9]

However, when party delegates convened in Moscow in May 1924 to examine Lenin's Testament, Stalin encountered a setback. After Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, two party elders disturbed by Trotsky's ambition, spoke out in favour of Stalin, the Central Committee decided to read the document only to select delegates as opposed to the entire assembled congress. Trotsky, reluctant to appear divisive in his coming bid for power, did not intervene. Stalin, pale as death, humbly asked for release from his duties, hoping that his show of contrition would prompt the Central Committee to refuse his request. His gamble paid off, but left him seething with resentment. He was the disciple of a man who seemed to have demanded his removal.[10]

After regaining his composure, Stalin began surrounding himself with reliable, loyal supporters, including Vyacheslav Molotov, Lazar Kaganovich and Sergo Ordzhonikidze. He used his position as General Secretary to replace supporters of all his rivals with his own henchmen. He acquired personal assistants to gather information and undertake his shadier tasks. Lev Mekhlis, Stalin's personal secretary, began overseeing every aspect of Stalin's public image, vetting photographs that appeared in the press.[11]

In November 1924 Stalin cornered Trotsky. Whereas Stalin presented himself as Lenin's pupil, Trotsky had made the tactical error of posing as Lenin's equal by publishing his own collected writings. Not only did Trotsky appear vain, but he provided textual evidence of many differences over issues on which he had opposed Lenin. Stalin published a vicious piece entitled 'Trotskyism or Leninism?', denouncing his rival as the proponent of a permanent revolution that put him at loggerheads with the very principles of Leninism. Careful readers understood that the title meant Trotsky or Stalin.

Stalin also targeted Trotsky's criticism of the New Economic Policy. Other Bolsheviks, including Zinoviev and Kamenev, the two powerful Central Committee leaders who had helped Stalin survive Lenin's testament, disliked the turn towards the market. Stalin whittled away at them, portraying them as doctrinaire leftists whose ideas would lead the Soviet Union to perdition. Nikolai

Bukharin, a tireless defender of the mixed economy, assisted him. In 1925 Stalin himself addressed peasant representatives who refused to sow crops unless they were granted land leases. With a flick of the hand Stalin promised leases for twenty years, forty years, possibly even in perpetuity. When asked if this did not seem like a return to private land ownership, he responded 'We wrote the constitution. We can change it too.' Reports of the meeting circulated around the world. Stalin came across as the level-headed, pragmatic boss of the party, a leader attuned to his people.[12]

By 1926 Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev were forced into a United Opposition against Stalin, who promptly turned on them and denounced them for bringing instability to the party by forming a faction. Since factions had been outlawed years earlier, Trotsky was expelled from the Politburo. His followers dwindled to a mere handful. In October 1927, at a full Central Committee meeting, Trotsky once more tried to bring up Lenin's Testament. By then, however, many party delegates had come to view Stalin as the self-effacing, efficient, hard-working defender of Lenin. The marginalised Trotsky, by contrast, seemed condescending, noisy and self-absorbed. Stalin crushed him, retorting that three years earlier the party had examined the document and refused his resignation. Delegates erupted in applause. Within a month the party expelled Trotsky and dozens of his followers. In January 1928 Trotsky was sent into exile to Kazakhstan. One year later he was deported from the Soviet Union.[13]

Just as soon as his main rival was dispatched Stalin began implementing Trotsky's policies. Trotsky had warned against a 'new capitalist class' in the countryside. After grain supplies tumbled by a third in late 1927, threatening Moscow and Leningrad with starvation, Stalin sent procurement squads into the villages, ordering them to grab what they could at gunpoint. Those who resisted were persecuted as kulaks, a derogatory term meant to designate 'rich' farmers but used for anyone who opposed collectivisation. This was the opening battle in a war against the countryside that would culminate a few years later in famine.

Those within the party, including Bukharin, who still adhered to Stalin's earlier views were lambasted as rightists. Crushing fear now pervaded the party, with its members denounced and summarily arrested as 'left oppositionists' or 'right deviators'. Homes were searched and relatives taken away. People disappeared overnight. Stalin also cracked down on managers, engineers and planners, including foreigners accused of deliberate sabotage.[14]

In the midst of a purge of the party ranks, a huge parade was organised for May Day 1928. Ever since 1886, when the Chicago police had fired on strikers demanding an eight-hour workday, socialists around the world had celebrated 1 May. Marches by workers with unfurled banners and red flags were regular events in many cities around the world, sometimes degenerating into street fights with the police. Lenin, early in his career, had seen the potential of these celebrations, writing that they could be developed into 'great political demonstrations'. In 1901 Stalin himself had been involved in bloody clashes around May Day in Tiflis (Tbilisi), the capital of his native Georgia.[15]

In 1918 Lenin made May Day an official holiday. A decade later, in 1928, Stalin had the Labour Code amended, adding 2 May to the festivities. Preparations for these showpiece events began weeks in advance, with gigantic wood and cardboard structures erected at the main intersections of Moscow, depicting workers, peasants and soldiers marching towards the future. On 1 May Stalin and his principal lieutenants appeared on the wooden ramparts of the Lenin Mausoleum, saluting a flood of humanity cheering and singing under banners and floats. Then came a giant parade of rumbling tanks, armoured cars, machine guns and searchlights, with aeroplanes buzzing overhead. It was an enormous display of organisational strength, meticulously planned from above, with every word scripted and every slogan approved by decree. Hundreds of thousands waited meekly for hours for their turn to cross the square and glimpse the leader.[16]

By 1929 Stalin was ready to impose his mark on the Soviet Union. Lenin had already transformed Russia into the world's first

one-party state, accomplishing what Hitler would try to achieve in the name of *Gleichschaltung* after 1933: the systematic elimination of all organisations outside the party. Alternative political parties, trade unions, the media, churches, guilds and associations all came under the thumb of the state. Free elections had been banned immediately after November 1917, and the rule of law was abolished, replaced by revolutionary justice and a sprawling gulag system.

Stalin sought to go further and permanently alter the country's economy by turning an agricultural backwater into an industrial powerhouse within a mere five years. Huge industrial cities were built from scratch, turnkey factories imported from abroad, engineering plants expanded and new mines opened to meet the need for coal, iron and steel, all at breakneck speed. No eight-hour workday existed in the Soviet Union, as factory workers toiled seven days a week. The key to industrial expansion lay in the countryside, with grain taken from the villagers sold on the international market to earn foreign currency. In order to extract more grain, the countryside was collectivised. Villagers were herded into state farms, from which the kulaks were excluded. Stalin viewed collectivisation as a unique opportunity to liquidate the entire kulak class, as some 320,000 households were broken up, their members sent to concentration camps, forced to work in mines or transported to distant regions of the empire.[17]

The party, under Stalin's leadership, was now sacrosanct, the party line presented as a mystical will that was beyond debate. Stalin became the personification of that sanctity, the *vozhd*, or great leader, a term previously reserved for Lenin. On 1 May 1929 Marx receded into the background, while Stalin ascended to equal status with Lenin. As one American journalist noted, 'On Red Square, on the buildings opposite the Kremlin walls, huge faces of Lenin and Stalin were displayed. Their gigantic full-length portraits were mounted on scaffolding on Theatre Square, looming high above the Metropole Hotel on one side and the Grand Hotel on the other.'[18]

The great leader was fifty on 21 December 1929, an occasion celebrated by 'numberless telegrams', the party's mouthpiece *Pravda* explained, as workers the world over greeted Stalin. Congratulatory slips of paper were even smuggled out of prisons in Poland, Hungary and Italy. This was not hero-worship, the propaganda machine clarified, but an expression of devotion from millions of workers everywhere to the idea of the proletarian revolution. Stalin was the party, the embodiment of all that was best in the working class: 'flamboyant enthusiasm kept in bounds by an iron will, unshakable faith in victory based on sober revolutionary Marxian analysis, a proletarian contempt of death on the civil war fronts', the circumspection of a leader whose mind 'illuminated the future like a searchlight'.[19]

Other demonstrations of flattery abounded, as Stalin's underlings composed paeans to their leader, enthusiastically abasing themselves. Lazar Kaganovich, the stocky, thick-moustached secretary of the party, praised him as 'the closest, most active, most faithful assistant of Lenin'. Sergo Ordzhonikidze described his master as a true and unfaltering disciple of Lenin armed with the iron will to lead the party to the final victory of the world proletarian revolution.[20]

Few people, however, had ever seen Stalin except from a distance, as he stood on the rostrum in Red Square twice a year to celebrate May Day and the October Revolution. Even then he appeared almost like a sculpture, a robust figure adopting a stolid, calm pose in a military overcoat with a peaked cap. He rarely appeared in newsreels and never spoke in public. Not once had his voice been heard over the radio. His photographs, strictly controlled by his personal secretary, were all standardised. Even in posters Stalin seemed cold and distant, the embodiment of an unflinching will to push through the revolution.[21]

Over the course of a decade Stalin had moved from inconspicuous commissar to undisputed leader of the party. But he had repeatedly been forced to do battle with powerful forces arrayed against him. In a testament that would haunt Stalin for the rest of his life, Lenin, after handing him supreme power, had had second thoughts and called for his removal. Time and again, Trotsky, a formidable orator, gifted polemicist and respected leader of the Red Army, had

confronted him. Sheer vindictiveness and cold calculation had kept Stalin moving forward, but over the years he also developed a sense of grievance, viewing himself as a victim. A victor with a grudge, he became permanently distrustful of those around him.[22]

The image of a stern, aloof leader towering above his potential critics suited him well, but Stalin soon began to cultivate a more human aspect. Trotsky in inner exile cut a dramatic figure, making Stalin resemble the keeper of a caged lion. As soon as he was abroad, he tried to appear more Leninist than Stalin. He began publishing a *Bulletin of the Opposition*, using his detailed knowledge of corridor politics to report on controversies within the party leadership. His autobiography *My Life*, published in Russian and English in 1930, portrayed Stalin as a mediocre, jealous and devious character whose covert machinations had led to a betrayal of the revolution. Trotsky reproduced Lenin's Testament: 'Stalin is rude, disloyal, and capable of abuse of the power that he derives from the party apparatus. Stalin should be removed to avoid a split.' Stalin had coined the term Trotskyism, and now Trotsky in turn popularised the notion of Stalinism.[23]

A year earlier, on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, the leader's Georgian colleague Avel Enukidze had introduced a few human touches, bringing together some elements of the Stalin myth. Stalin was the son of a cobbler, a precocious and gifted student, but also a young rebel, thrown out of a theological seminary. He lacked all vanity. He was a man of the people with a knack for explaining complicated matters very simply to workers, who affectionately nicknamed him 'Soso'. He never wavered in his defence of Bolshevism and gave himself entirely to revolutionary work. 'Stalin will remain the same to the end of his life,' Enukidze proclaimed.[24]

Stalin was not merely the leader of the party. He was also de facto head of the Communist International, or Comintern, making him the figure pointing the way forward towards the worldwide proletarian revolution. Yet at home and abroad he still remained, unlike Trotsky, a mysterious, distant figure. In November 1930 Stalin invited the United Press correspondent Eugene Lyons to meet him personally in his office. Lyons, a fellow-traveller who

had worked in the New York office of TASS, the official Soviet news agency, had been carefully selected from dozens of reporters in Moscow. Stalin met him at the door. He smiled, but there was a shyness that instantly disarmed the correspondent. His shaggy moustache, Lyons reported, gave his swarthy face a friendly and almost benign look. Everything spoke of simplicity, from his relaxed manner, the austerity of his attire and the spartan nature of his office to the quiet, orderly corridors of the headquarters of the Central Committee. Stalin listened. He was thoughtful. 'Are you a dictator,' Lyons finally asked. 'No, I am not,' Stalin replied gently, explaining that in the party all decisions were collective and no one person could dictate. 'I like that man,' exulted Lyons on the way out. 'Stalin Laughs!', a sycophantic piece of work edited by Stalin himself, appeared on the front page of major newspapers around the world, 'ripping the cloak of secrecy' surrounding the recluse of the Kremlin.[25]

Stalin had inserted an intimate domestic note into the interview, talking about his wife and three children. A week later Hubert Knickerbocker interviewed Stalin's mother, a simple woman wearing a common dress of grey wool. 'Soso was always a good boy!' she exulted, happy to talk about her favourite subject.[26]

More prestigious intellectual figures followed, popularising and diffusing the image of a kindly, simple, modest man who was no dictator despite wielding huge power. A year later the socialist author George Bernard Shaw received a military guard of honour in Moscow and a banquet to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday. He toured the country, visiting model schools, prisons and farms, with villagers and workers carefully drilled to praise the party and their leader. After a two-hour private audience, masterfully staged by Stalin, the Irish playwright found the dictator a 'charmingly good-humoured fellow' and proclaimed: 'There was no malice in him, but also no credulity.' Shaw never tired of promoting the despot, and died in 1950 in his bed with a portrait of his idol on the mantelpiece.[27]

Emil Ludwig, a popular biographer of Napoleon and Bismarck, likewise met Stalin in December 1931, and was struck by the

simplicity of a man who had so much power but 'took no pride in its possession'. But the individual whose biography did most to propagate the image of a simple man who grudgingly accepted the adoration of millions was probably Henri Barbusse, a French writer who moved to Moscow in 1918 and joined the Bolshevik Party. When they first met in 1927 Stalin completely captivated Barbusse, whose laudatory articles were translated in *Pravda*. Following another encounter in 1932 the Culture and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee carefully vetted Barbusse, who also organised the Paris-based World Committee Against War and Fascism. In October 1933 Barbusse collected 385,000 francs Stalin had sent to Paris, the rough equivalent of US$330,000 in today's money. In the words of André Gide, another French literary figure whom Stalin had approached, substantial financial advantages awaited those who wrote 'in the right direction'.[28]

Stalin provided all the documentation for his biographer, with every detail supervised by his underlings within the propaganda machine. In *Stalin: A New World Seen through One Man*, published in March 1935, Barbusse portrayed Stalin as a new messiah, a superhuman whose name millions chanted at every parade on Red Square. Yet even as those around him adored him, he remained modest, crediting his master Lenin for every victory. His salary was a meagre five hundred roubles, his home had only three windows. His eldest son slept on a couch in the dining room, the younger one in an alcove. He had one secretary, in contrast to former British prime minister Lloyd George who had employed thirty-two. Even in his personal life this 'frank and brilliant man' remained 'a simple man'.[29]

From Henri Barbusse to George Bernard Shaw foreign celebrities helped Stalin get around a paradox at the very heart of his cult: the Soviet Union was supposedly a dictatorship of the proletariat, not the dictatorship of one individual. In communist polemics, only fascist dictators like Mussolini and Hitler proclaimed that their word was above the law, their people obedient subjects who must bend to their will. Therefore, even as his cult pervaded all aspects of everyday life, the very idea that Stalin was a dictator became taboo.

Ostensibly the people glorified him, against his own wishes, and it was they who demanded to see him, as he reluctantly displayed himself to millions during the Red Square parades.[30]

Every aspect of his image stood in contrast to those of his nemeses. Hitler and Mussolini would rant and rave in front of their followers, while at party gatherings the self-effacing secretary would sit in watchful silence in the back row of a crowded platform. They spoke at people, he listened to them. They were dominated by emotion, he stood for reason, carefully weighing his every word. His words were few, and therefore treasured and studied by all. As Emil Ludwig put it, even his quietness conveyed power, as there was something slightly menacing in 'the dangerous weight of the silent'.[31]

Stalin may, as Henri Barbusse claimed, have had only one secretary, but after his fiftieth birthday in 1929 he used the party machine to shore up his cult, as posters, portraits, books and busts began to proliferate. In the summer of 1930 the Sixteenth Congress of the Communist Party became a demonstration of fealty to Stalin, who spoke for seven hours. Praise, now obligatory, circulated inside the congress, in the newspapers and on the radio.[32]

In the countryside, where a merciless campaign of collectivisation was being enforced, statues of Lenin and Stalin could be seen at the peak of the 1932 famine. An estimated six million people died of hunger in Ukraine, the Urals, the Volga, Kazakhstan and parts of Siberia, as huge stocks of grain as well as milk, eggs and meat were sold on the international market to finance the Five-Year Plan. Even as they were reduced to eating grass and tree bark, villagers were forced to acclaim their leader.[33]

In 1930 the Sixteenth Congress had been greeted by 'stormy, prolonged applause extending into a lengthy ovation'. Four years later, at the Seventeenth Congress, this was no longer deemed adequate, and the stenograms recorded a 'tremendous ovation' as well as shouts of 'Long Live our Stalin!' The gathering was hailed as a Congress of Victors, as the delegates celebrated the successes of agricultural collectivisation and rapid industrialisation. But behind

the scenes members grumbled about Stalin's methods. Some feared his ambition even as they publicly acclaimed him. Rumour had it that he had received so many negative votes that some paper ballots had to be destroyed.[34]

Stalin did nothing. He knew the virtue of patience, displaying a nerveless, calculated restraint in the face of adversity. But when in late 1934 an assassin shot Sergey Kirov, the boss of Leningrad, Stalin took drastic measures. This marked the start of the Great Terror, as party members who had at some point or another defied Stalin were arrested. In August 1936 Zinoviev and Kamenev, the first to undergo a show trial, were found guilty and executed. Others followed, including Bukharin and twenty other defendants allegedly part of a 'Bloc of Rightists and Trotskyites'. More than 1.5 million ordinary people were ensnared by the secret police, interrogated, tortured and in many cases summarily executed. At the campaign's height in 1937 and 1938 the execution rate was roughly a thousand per day, with people accused of being class enemies, saboteurs, oppositionists or speculators, some denounced by their own neighbours or relatives.[35]

The cult flourished as the terror unfolded. In 1934, Stalin was not the only one glorified by his underlings. By the end of the 1920s virtually every leader, down to directors of local enterprises, had their workers carry their portraits in triumph on public holidays. Some leaders became little Stalins, copying their master in their own fiefdoms, immortalising themselves in portraits and statues, surrounded by sycophants who sang their praises. One such was Ivan Rumiantsev, himself a flatterer who acclaimed Stalin as a 'genius' in 1934. He viewed himself as the Stalin of the Western Region, compelling 134 collective farms to be named after him. In the spring of 1937 Rumiantsev was denounced as a spy and shot.[36]

Sometimes Politburo members had entire cities renamed in their honour. Stalingrad existed, but so did Molotov and Ordzhonikidze. When a leader fell from favour, names were summarily revised, as happened to the ill-fated cities of Trotsk and Zinovevsk. But by 1938 only one other name was allowed equal standing with Stalin's, that

of Mikhail Kalinin, nominal President of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, or head of state from 1919 to 1946. His role was purely symbolic, but he served admirably, dutifully signing each and every one of Stalin's decrees. When his wife was arrested for calling Stalin a 'tyrant and a sadist', Kalinin did not lift a finger.[37]

In June 1934, three months after the Congress of Victors, Stalin began overseeing every aspect of the state propaganda machine. His image became still more ubiquitous, with one American visitor observing large portraits 'on the hoardings surrounding the new metro excavations in Moscow, on the façades of public buildings in Kazan, in the Red Corners of shops, on the walls of guardrooms and prisons, in shops, in the Kremlin, the cathedrals, the cinemas, everywhere'.[38]

In the intervals between signing death warrants and directing show trials Stalin met with writers, painters, sculptors and playwrights. The individual, in every aspect of art, vanished, as Stalin imposed a style known as 'socialist realism'. Art had to glorify the revolution. Fairy tales were prohibited as unproletarian: children were to be enthralled with books about tractors and coal mines. In what one historian has called a 'hall of mirrors', the same motives were endlessly repeated as committees vetted texts and images. Since Stalin was the embodiment of the revolution, he was the most prominent of them all: 'it was not a rare incident for workers to compose a letter to Stalin during a meeting in the Stalin House of Culture of the Stalin Factory on Stalin Square in the city of Stalinsk.'[39]

Stalinsk was but one of five cities named after the great leader. There were also Stalingrad, Stalinabad, Stalino and Stalinagorsk. Great parks, factories, railways and canals were all named after him. The Stalin Canal, dug all the way from the White Sea to Leningrad on the Baltic Sea by convict labour during the first Five-Year Plan, was opened in 1933. The best steels were christened stalinite. 'His name is shouted at you through every printed column, every billboard, every radio,' noted Eugene Lyons: 'His image is ubiquitous, picked out in flowers on public lawns, in electric lights, on postage stamps; it is for sale in plaster-of-Paris and bronze busts

in nearly every shop, in crude colours on teacups, in lithographs and picture postcards.'[40]

The number of propaganda posters fell from 240 in 1934 to 70 in 1937, but their print runs increased as the focus shifted towards the leader himself. When ordinary people made a fleeting appearance, it was always in relation to him: gazing up at him, carrying his portrait in parades, studying his texts, saluting him, singing songs about him and following him into a utopian future.[41]

Stalin, now all-pervasive, acquired a benign smile. The Congress of Victors had, after all, announced in 1934 that socialism had been achieved, and Stalin himself proclaimed one year later that 'life has become more joyous'. There was a smiling Stalin surrounded by adoring crowds, and a smiling Stalin with joyous children presenting flowers. One image, circulated in its millions, showed him at a Kremlin reception in 1936 taking flowers from a small girl in a sailor suit named Gelia Markizova (her father was later shot as an enemy of the people). Stalin was Grandfather Frost, the Russian Santa Claus, beaming benevolently as children celebrated New Year's Day. Everything, it seemed, was a gift from Stalin. Buses, tractors, schools, housing, collective farms, all were bestowed by Him, the ultimate dispenser of goods. Even adults, it seemed, were children, Stalin their father, or, rather, the 'little father', or *batiushka*, a term of endearment used for tsars who expressed concern over the welfare of their subjects. The constitution, passed at the height of the show trials in December 1936, was Stalin's Constitution.[42]

Every new expression was engineered from above. After the young writer Aleksandr Avdeenko concluded a speech in 1935 with a vote of thanks to the Soviet Union he was approached by Lev Mekhlis, Stalin's personal secretary, who suggested that he should have thanked Stalin instead. A few months later Avdeenko's words at the World Congress of Writers in Paris were broadcast to the Soviet Union, ending every sentence with a ritualistic 'Thank you Stalin!' and 'For I am joyous, thank you Stalin!' His career thrived, and on three subsequent occasions he received the Stalin Prize.[43]

Less joyous writers were consigned to the gulag, the country's sprawling system of concentration camps. Osip Mandelstam, one

of Russia's greatest poets, was arrested for reciting a sarcastic poem critical of the leader to close friends in 1934 and died in a transit camp a few years later. Others, from poets and philosophers to playwrights, were simply shot.

Since the cult was supposed to reflect popular adoration, poems and songs composed by the labouring masses were widely propagated. From a Soviet Daghestan woman came the adulatory lines: 'Above the valley, the mountain peak; Above the peak the sky. But Stalin, skies have no height to equal you, only your thoughts rise higher. The stars, the moon, pale before the sun that pales in turn before your shining mind'. Seidik Kvarchia, a collectivised farmer, composed a *Song of Stalin*: 'The man who fought in front of all fighters, Who succoured orphans, widows and the aged; Before whom all enemies do tremble'.[44]

Despite the carefully cultivated impression of spontaneity, by 1939 a rigid canon was imposed. Official newspapers, orators and poets all sang the same hymn, praising the 'unmatched genius', 'the great and beloved Stalin', 'the leader and inspirer of the working classes of the whole world', 'the great and glorious Stalin, head and brilliant theoretician of the world revolution'. People knew when to applaud at public gatherings, and when to invoke his name on public occasions. Repetition was key, not innovation, meaning that excessive flattery could be dangerous, too. Stalin, noted Nadezhda Mandelstam, wife of the murdered poet, had no need of zealots of any kind: he wanted people to be obedient instruments of his will, with no convictions of their own. The party machine, more often than not through the chief of Stalin's personal chancellery, Alexander Poskrebyshev, prescribed every word and picture. But Stalin himself was also a compulsive editor, poring over editorials, editing speeches and reviewing articles. In 1937 he neatly excised the expression 'Greatest Man of our Time' from a TASS agency report on the May Day parade. Stalin was a gardener, constantly pruning his own cult, cutting back here and there to allow it to flourish in good season.[45]

Stalinism entered the vocabulary when Stalin judged the time to be ripe. Lazar Kaganovich, the first true Stalinist, allegedly proposed

'Let's replace Long Live Leninism with Long Live Stalinism!' at a dinner with Stalin in the early 1930s. Stalin modestly declined, but the term occurred with increasing frequency from the very moment the constitution was passed on 5 December 1936: 'Our constitution is Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism'. Several weeks later, on New Year's Eve, Sergo Ordzhonikidze used the expression to great applause in a speech entitled 'Our Country is Invincible', proclaiming how Stalin motivated an army of 170 million people armed with 'Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism'.[46]

Stalin's 1924 lectures, published as *Foundations of Leninism*, sold swiftly after 1929, and by 1934 more than sixteen million copies of the leader's various works were in circulation. But Leninism was not Stalinism. A founding text similar to *Mein Kampf* was required. This was all the more urgent since no official biography of Stalin existed. Potential hagiographers found the task daunting, as the past was continually changing. It was one thing to airbrush a dead commissar out of a photograph, quite another to keep on amending a biography. Even Henri Barbusse's book fell from favour soon after its publication in 1935, since it mentioned leaders who had been arrested.[47]

The *Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party* was the answer. It presented a direct line of succession from Marx and Engels to Lenin and Stalin. Every episode of the party's history was covered, presenting the reader with a clear narrative in which the correct party line, represented by Lenin and his follower Stalin, had been opposed by a string of devious anti-party cliques that had been successfully eliminated along the path to socialism. The *Short Course* was commissioned in 1935 by Stalin, who demanded several revisions and edited the full text on five occasions before allowing its publication, to great fanfare, in September 1938. The book became a canonical text that deified Stalin as the living fount of wisdom, selling more than forty-two million copies in Russian alone, with translations into sixty-seven languages.[48]

On 21 December 1939 Stalin turned sixty. Six months earlier in Berlin leaders had queued up at the chancellery to offer their

best wishes to Hitler. In Moscow the congratulations were a public exercise in self-abasement, as party leaders published lengthy paeans in a twelve-page edition of *Pravda*. 'The Greatest Man of our Time,' gushed Lavrentiy Beria, the new head of the NKVD. 'Stalin, the Great Driver of the Locomotive of History,' declared Lazar Kaganovich. 'Stalin is Today's Lenin,' proclaimed Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan. Stalin, the entire Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet wrote, was 'The most beloved and dearest man of our country and of the working people of all the world'. Upon the 'Great Continuer of Lenin's Task – Comrade Stalin', they bestowed the order of Hero of Socialist Labour.[49]

Stalin required abasement from his entourage, boundless enthusiasm from the masses, whose gifts arrived from every corner of the Soviet Union. It was their long-awaited chance to repay Stalin, the ultimate carer and provider, with a token of their undying gratitude. There were drawings from children, photographs from factories, paintings and busts by amateurs, telegrams from admirers, a tidal wave of offerings that required a month of acknowledgements in the pages of *Pravda*. Selected items were displayed in the Museum of the Revolution as a testament to the people's devotion.[50]

Among the many foreign well-wishers was Adolf Hitler. 'Please accept my most sincere congratulations on your sixtieth birthday. I take this occasion to tender my best wishes. I wish you personally good health and a happy future for the peoples of the friendly Soviet Union.'[51]

For the best part of a decade Stalin and Hitler had observed each other with a mixture of growing wariness and grudging admiration. 'Hitler, what a great fellow!' Stalin exclaimed after the Night of the Long Knives. Hitler, for his part, found the Great Terror deeply impressive. But Stalin had read *Mein Kampf* carefully, including those passages where its author promised to erase Russia from the map. 'Never forget,' Hitler had written, 'that the rulers of present-day Russia are bloodstained common criminals. We are dealing with the scum of humanity.'[52]

After the Munich Agreement in September 1938 Stalin called a halt to the Great Terror. Its main executioner, Nikolai Yezhov, was purged in November and replaced by Beria. By this time Stalin was surrounded by sycophants. Every potential opponent within the leadership had fallen victim to the purges. Since insufficient zeal in supporting the party line could be construed as disloyalty, the secret service had even turned against those who remained silent. Stalin had no friends, only underlings; no allies, only flatterers. As a result, he alone took all major decisions.

On 23 August 1939 Stalin stunned the world by signing a non-aggression pact with Hitler, in what seemed a brilliant if highly risky move in an unprincipled power game. By freeing Germany from the need to wage war on two fronts, the Soviet Union could sit back and watch the capitalist countries fight each other to exhaustion. Within weeks it became clear that there were secret clauses to the pact, as the Soviet Union invaded half of Poland.

Hitler also gave Stalin a free hand in Finland, and in November 1939 the Soviet Union attacked its tiny neighbour. What should have been an easy victory turned into a bloody stalemate, with more than 120,000 Soviet casualties. The Great Terror had clearly crippled the Red Army, since some 30,000 officers had fallen victim to Stalin's purges. Three of the army's five marshals had been executed. A peace treaty was signed in March 1940, but the experience left the Kremlin in shock. Finland exposed the military weakness of the Soviet Union.[53]

The country's carefully fostered reputation as a peace-loving nation was also shattered. The League of Nations expelled the Soviet Union. Abroad, some who identified with the ideals of socialism now viewed Joseph Stalin as the equivalent of Adolf Hitler.

Stalin had badly miscalculated. In order to prepare a defensive line against Germany, he invaded the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and made them into Soviet protectorates. This plan, too, was short-sighted, based on his belief that Hitler would become bogged down in France. But German troops reached Paris within less than five weeks. It now seemed as if Hitler would be able to secure one of Germany's flanks far sooner than expected and

turn his tanks against the Soviet Union. By May 1941 a mounting tide of evidence from Stalin's own intelligence services pointed to a massive German military build-up along the frontier. Stalin, relying on experience and intuition, dismissed it as mere provocation. In the words of historian Robert Service, in his supreme confidence Stalin had unwittingly prepared 'the conditions for the greatest military disaster of the twentieth century'.[54]

Stalin was in bed in his dacha some two hundred kilometres outside Moscow when more than three million German soldiers poured across the border. Chief of General Staff Georgy Zhukov, who had warned him repeatedly of an impending invasion, phoned his master, who hurried back to the Kremlin. He still believed it was a conspiracy, until hours later the German ambassador clarified the situation: Germany was at war with the Soviet Union. Stalin was distraught, but recovered quickly, establishing a Supreme Command packed with his political commissars. Then he abandoned the Kremlin, returning to his dacha, where he skulked for several days.

German tanks rolled across the vast plains of western Russia, with separate formations smashing their way to Leningrad in the north and Kiev in the south. Along the way many Soviets welcomed the troops as liberators, especially in Ukraine where millions had starved during the famine. But Hitler viewed all as racial degenerates, to be reduced to serfdom.

On 3 July 1941 Stalin spoke over the radio, preparing the Soviet people for war by appealing to patriotism rather than communism. Crowds gathered to listen to the broadcast in city squares, 'holding their breath in such profound silence that one could hear every inflection of Stalin's voice', according to one foreign observer. For several minutes after he had finished the silence continued. Overnight, at home and abroad, he became the defender of freedom. Alexander Werth, a journalist based in Moscow, remembered that 'the Soviet people now felt that they had a leader to look to'.[55]

Stalin, back in control, ordered that every town be defended to the last, very much against the advice of his generals. Instead of ordering a strategic withdrawal from Kiev, he allowed the

Ukrainian capital to be encircled, with half a million troops trapped inside. But the arrival of winter a month later, combined with fierce resistance from Russian troops, halted the German advance on Moscow. In December 1941 the United States entered the war, tilting the balance back in favour of the Soviet Union. By then over two million Red Army soldiers had been killed, and 3.5 million taken prisoner.

Stalin did not quite vanish from view after his radio address, but appeared only fleetingly during the war's first years. He did not write for the newspapers, and he rarely spoke in public, passing up every opportunity to inspire and motivate his people. *Pravda* published occasional photographs, showing him as army commander with a military cap and a single red star, his uniform decorated with imposing epaulettes. But he seemed more a disembodied symbol of the war effort than a Supreme Commander leading his people in the Great Patriotic War. No information was divulged on his activities or his family life. His seclusion had the advantage, one foreign journalist noted, that there was no clash between image and reality since the public knew so little about their leader.[56]

Only after the Battle of Stalingrad turned the tide of war in February 1943, ending the threat to the oil fields of the Caucasus, did Stalin return to centre stage. He promoted many of his officers, awarding himself the title of Marshal of the Soviet Union. Newspapers were peppered with new expressions, from 'Stalinist strategy' and 'the Stalinist military school of thought' to the 'military genius of Stalin'. His proclamations following each victory were solemnly read over the radio and marked by a salute of guns, with 1944 celebrated as the year of the 'ten Stalinist blows'.[57]

Stalin also presented himself as a key player on the world stage, a great and dignified statesman with a grey moustache and silver hair. He was shown in the company of foreign dignitaries in a wood-panelled room in the Kremlin, standing back as his underlings signed treaties. He appeared next to British prime minister Winston Churchill and US president Franklin D. Roosevelt in summit meetings in Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam, planning the post-war

world. His smile returned, as he sat majestically in his marshal's greatcoat, one of the world's great statesmen.[58]

The world's great figures who shuffled through Stalin's office said good words about him. 'I like him the more I see him,' pronounced Churchill, unaware of just how much Stalin despised and belittled him. The Americans agreed. A credulous Roosevelt perceived something beyond a revolutionary in Stalin's nature, namely a 'Christian gentleman'. Truman, who succeeded to the presidency after Roosevelt passed away, confided to his diary: 'I can deal with Stalin. He is honest – but smart as hell.' His secretary of state James Byrnes held that 'The truth is he is a very likeable person.' Stalin enthralled foreign journalists, who routinely referred to him as Uncle Joe.[59]

Even some of Stalin's own people liked him. Terror and propaganda had advanced hand in hand throughout the 1930s, with millions starved, imprisoned or executed. Only the most foolhardy foreign admirer could believe that his own victims genuinely adored the perpetrator of so much human misery. When Nadezhda Mandelstam was forced to seek work in a textile factory in Strunino, a small town just outside Moscow, she discovered that during the Great Terror local people were so embittered that they routinely referred to Stalin as 'the pockmarked fellow'. But almost everyone was traumatised by a war waged with unparalleled savagery, as the invaders went far beyond the battlefield to torture, murder and enslave, determined to crush people they considered racially inferior.[60]

Entire cities were starved into submission, with a million lives claimed just in the twenty-eight-month siege of Leningrad. More than seven million civilians were killed in occupied areas, not counting a further four million who died of hunger or disease. Some twenty-five million people were made homeless, with 70,000 villages erased from the map. Perhaps understandably, some people looked up to Stalin, needing someone to believe in. The propaganda machine conflated Stalin and the motherland as one and the same. He was the leader of a just war, the Supreme Commander of a Red

Army that would not only liberate the motherland but also exact revenge.[61]

Yet even as war worked wonders in enhancing his reputation, large swathes of the population apparently remained indifferent. Propaganda relentlessly projected an image of a potent and sage leader rallying the masses against the common enemy, but when a British journalist spent a week travelling by train from Murmansk to Moscow, speaking to dozens of soldiers, railway workers and civilians from all walks of life, Stalin's name was not mentioned once.[62]

Distrust of the one-party state ran deep in the countryside, where young men were drafted into the army. Many new recruits were religious villagers who wrote letters back home ending with the words 'Long Live Jesus Christ'. In 1939 some of them defaced busts of Lenin and Stalin, driving political instructors to sheer despair. It was the propagandists in the army who cared most about Stalin. These attitudes changed after the imposition of ruthless discipline in 1941. In July 1942 Stalin issued Order Number 227, 'Not a Step Backward!', treating disobedience or retreat as treason. Special units were placed behind the front line to shoot laggards, leaving the troops in no doubt as to whom they should fear most, Stalin or Hitler. More generally, the regime showed little regard for the lives of its soldiers. Those injured or mutilated while fighting received heartless treatment, with many rounded up and deported to the gulag.[63]

The Red Army was destroyed and renewed at least twice, but Stalin could afford to lose more tanks and more people than Hitler. On their way to Berlin, the German capital, the troops engaged in widespread looting, pillaging and rape, more often than not with the approval of their commanders, including Stalin.[64]

Stalin ran the war as he ran everything else, singlehandedly. In the words of Isaac Deutscher, one of his earliest biographers, 'He was in effect his own commander-in-chief, his own minister of defence, his own quartermaster, his own minister of supply, his own foreign minister, and even his own chef de protocol.' As the red flag went up over Berlin, he was the great victor. Yet Stalin,

more paranoid than ever, distrusted the army. The real hero was Chief of General Staff and Deputy Chief Supreme Commander Georgy Zhukov, who had led the westward march towards Hitler's bunker. In Moscow the population called him 'our St George', from the patron saint of the capital. Zhukov led the victory parade in Red Square on 24 June 1945, although he understood his master well enough to refer to him as 'the captain of genius' in his tribute. The party line relentlessly glorified 'Our great genius and leader of troops, comrade Stalin, to whom we owe our historic victory'. That same month, Stalin gave himself the ultimate accolade, bestowing upon himself the title of Generalissimo.[65]

A year later, after his colleagues had been tortured into providing incriminating evidence, Zhukov was consigned to inner exile in the provinces. His name was no longer mentioned. Victory Day celebrations were suspended after 1946, memoirs by soldiers, officers and generals forbidden. In the official memory of the war, everyone receded into the background, allowing Stalin alone to shine. In 1947 a *Short Biography* of Stalin, designed for ordinary readers, was published to great fanfare. Strikingly similar to Henri Barbusse's hagiography published in 1935, it sold as many as eighteen million copies by 1953. The chapter on the Great Patriotic War mentioned none of his generals, least of all Zhukov, portraying Stalin as the architect of victory.[66]

During the war Stalin had encouraged rumours of more freedom to come, but these were crushed as soon as the fighting ended. Millions of Russians who had become involuntary prisoners of the Germans were considered besmirched and potentially treacherous. Treated as traitors, many were sent to camps, others shot. Stalin also feared that foreign ideas had contaminated the rest of the population.

As tensions between the three allies developed into a Cold War in 1947 the screws tightened further. Andrei Zhdanov, in a campaign closely scripted by Stalin, imposed ideological orthodoxy. Everything foreign was attacked, everything local extolled, from literature, linguistics, economics and biology to medicine. Stalin

personally intervened in several scientific debates, posing as an arbiter acting in the interests of Marxism. In a 10,000-word essay in *Pravda* he hinted that Russian was the language of the future, dismissing a leading linguist as anti-Marxist. In 1948 he lambasted genetics as a foreign and bourgeois science, bringing research in biology to a halt. For over a decade Stalin had ruled over a fearful and obsequious court. Now he battered entire fields of science into submission, promoting flatterers who fawned over his genius while sending dissenting professors to the gulag. Only one branch was exempt, namely research into the atomic bomb, for which unlimited resources were made available.[67]

Stalin's cult began to assume industrial proportions. Stalin had not only liberated the Soviet Union, but also occupied half of Europe. From Poland in the north to Bulgaria in the south the Red Army took over huge territories that were progressively converted into satellite states. Future leaders known as 'little Stalins' were flown in from Moscow to oversee the colonisation of their respective countries – Walter Ulbricht in East Germany, Bolesław Bierut in Poland, Mátyás Rákosi in Hungary. Initially progress was slow, since Stalin had ordered them to proceed cautiously, but everywhere by 1947 the secret services were incarcerating real and imagined enemies or sending them to camps. The communists also began to nationalise schools, dismantle independent organisations and undermine the Church. Demand for posters, portraits, busts and statues of Stalin skyrocketed, as new subjects were required to worship their distant master in the Kremlin, celebrated in Warsaw as 'Poland's unbending friend', in East Berlin as 'the best friend of the German people'.[68]

At home, too, statues and monuments to Stalin's glory multiplied, even though he himself, increasingly frail and exhausted, withdrew from public life. The peak of his cult came when he turned seventy in 1949. As he celebrated his birthday at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, searchlights picked out a giant figure of Stalin in full military uniform, suspended from balloons high above the Red Square. Millions of small red flags fluttered over Moscow the following day, with banners proclaiming the same message: 'Glory

to the Great Stalin'. The authorities distributed some two million posters, plus thousands of portraits, many illuminated at night. Monumental busts, *Pravda* proudly announced, had by then been placed on thirty-eight Central Asian mountain peaks. The first had appeared in 1937, as mountaineers had carried a statue to the highest summit in the Soviet Union, named Stalin Peak.[69]

Gifts were borne to Moscow on special trains decorated with red flags. But by contrast with previous occasions, Stalin's birthday was now a global event. People across the socialist camp vied to demonstrate their love for the leader in the Kremlin, the head of the international communist movement. More than a million letters and telegrams arrived from all corners of the world. Not until the summer of 1951 did the chorus of greetings abate, with *Pravda* publishing several hundred every day. Signatures from ordinary people were also required. In Czechoslovakia some nine million affixed their names, collected in 356 volumes, to a congratulatory message. North Korea easily outdid them, sending along precisely 16,767,680 signatures filling 400 hefty tomes.[70]

Gifts poured in, with workers from Eastern Europe sending an aircraft, several motorcars, a railway engine and a motorcycle. From China came a magnificent statue of Hua Mulan, a legendary woman warrior from the sixth century, and also Stalin's portrait engraved on a grain of rice. Many of the presents, meticulously inventoried, were exhibited in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, including some 250 statues and 500 busts. There were many spectacular pieces, perhaps none quite so impressive as a seventy-square-metre carpet representing Stalin in his office.[71]

Stalin appeared on his birthday flanked by the leaders of Eastern Europe and by Mao Zedong, who in October had triumphantly proclaimed the People's Republic of China. A few months earlier the first Soviet atomic bomb had been successfully tested, making Stalin the leader of a global superpower. It was a show of force as the socialist camp retreated behind an iron curtain, marking a turning point in the Cold War.

Stalin continued to purge to the very end. Paranoia is hard to measure, but age seemed to make him even more pitiless. Family

was no exception, since Stalin wished to hover above all others like a distant deity, mysterious and detached from his own personal history, which relatives knew only too well. In 1948 his sister-in-law Anna Allilueva was deported for ten years after publishing a memoir that offered seemingly innocuous glimpses into his earlier life. Except for his own children none of his relatives were safe. His court was terrified, reduced to fawning on his wisdom and competing for his favours even as he baited and humiliated them, playing on their fear or pitting them against each other. Constantly and inexorably, new purges unfolded, as the population in the gulag more than doubled to 2.5 million between 1944 and 1950. In between purges Stalin approved ever more extravagant monuments to his own glory. On 2 July 1951 he commissioned a statue of himself on the Volga–Don Canal using thirty-three tonnes of bronze. Stalin began self-deification as he sensed the coming of the end.[72]

On 1 March 1953 Stalin was found lying on the floor, soaked in his own urine. A blood vessel had burst in his brain, but no one had dared to disturb him in his bedroom. Medical help, too, was delayed, as the leader's entourage was petrified of making the wrong call. Stalin died three days later. His body was embalmed and displayed, but crowds of mourners determined to catch a last glimpse of their leader ran out of control. Hundreds were trampled to death in the ensuing panic. After an elaborate state funeral on 9 March he was laid to rest next to Lenin. Tower bells were rung and salute guns fired. Every train, bus, tram, lorry and car in the country came to a halt. Complete silence descended over Red Square. 'A single sparrow swooped over the mausoleum,' observed one foreign correspondent. An official announcement was made, then the flag slowly raised back to full mast. Eulogies came in from the beneficiaries of the regime, none more eloquent than those penned by Boris Polevoi and Nicolai Tikhonov, winners of the Stalin Prize. Millions grieved. One month after his funeral Stalin's name vanished from the newspapers.[73]

4

Mao

When Stalin appeared at the Bolshoi Theatre to show himself to the cameras for his seventieth birthday gala, he stood between Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev. Mao looked dour, awed by his counterpart in the Kremlin but resentful at the way he was being treated. He had expected to be welcomed as the leader of a great revolution that had brought a quarter of humanity into the communist orbit, but had been met at Yaroslavsky Station by two of Stalin's underlings who did not even accompany him to his residence. Stalin had granted Mao a brief interview, praising him for his success in Asia, but for several months a shroud of silence had been placed in the Soviet Union over the victory of the Chinese Communist Party.

After the birthday celebrations Mao was whisked off to a dacha outside the capital and made to wait several weeks for a formal audience. Meetings were cancelled, phone calls never returned. Mao lost patience, ranting about how he was in Moscow to do more than 'eat and shit'. With every passing day he was made to learn his humble place in a communist brotherhood which revolved entirely around Stalin.[1]

For the previous twenty-eight years the Chinese Communist Party had depended on Moscow for financial support. Mao, a tall, lean and handsome young man aged twenty-seven, had been handed his first cash payment of 200 yuan by a Comintern agent in 1921 to cover the cost of travelling to the founding meeting