

Hitler and Stalin: Ideas and Personality?

How do rulers of spectacular brutality get and keep power in a twentieth-century state? To what extent did their ideas, their personalities, and the mistakes of their opponents contribute to their success?

We choke on the numbers. Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), who ruled Germany from 1933 to his death, began a war in 1939 that resulted in the deaths of at least 40 million people. Over 6 million of these were European Jews and others systematically exterminated in what we call the Holocaust.¹

Joseph Stalin (1879–1953), sole ruler of the Soviet Union from 1929 to his death, forced millions of peasants off their private land and into large, inefficient, state-run farms in order to rapidly industrialize the giant Russian state. This “Great Leap Forward” in the early 1930s resulted in famine that took 5 million lives in the Ukraine alone between 1932 and 1934. Over a twenty-five year period, millions more were “liquidated” [executed] or sent to slave labor camps for real or imagined—mostly imagined—opposition to Stalin’s policies.

All told, a *minimum* of 50 million people died between 1930 and 1950 as a result of the beliefs and actions of these two men. To the extent that numbers matter, it can be argued that Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin had greater impact on the history of the twentieth century than any other two people.

Our textbooks tell us that Hitler ruled using a set of political and social beliefs known as Nazism; the term was taken from the name of Hitler’s political party, the National Socialist German Worker’s Party [Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei, or NSDAP in German]. Texts also tell us that Stalin was the successor



to Vladimir I. Lenin, the Bolshevik revolutionary whose party seized power in Russia in November 1917, with plans to create a socialist state and spark a worldwide socialist revolution.

What is not always clear in our discussion of the great political ideas of the twentieth century—nationalist, fascist, Nazi, communist, or totalitarian—is the crucial role of individuals such as Hitler and Stalin in shaping and defining them. Each took existing political sentiments (or resentments) in his country and turned them in incredibly brutal directions. They were able to do this because of their unscrupulous determination and because of the disunity, indecision, and scruples of their opponents. The lives of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin show us that the personalities of these leaders were more important than either the historical conditions in which they found themselves or the ideologies they represented, though these two were important as well. Both men had a pronounced sense of mission, or destiny, and emphasized the power of the will. Both were also extremely calculating, devious, and flexible, able to outwait and outwit their opponents.

Adolf Hitler's strong will was evident in his youth. Born in Austria, he was the son of Alois Hitler, a customs official, and his third (and much younger) wife, Klara. Klara's indulgence of her son contributed to his later sense of self-importance. Young Hitler was a bright but moody and erratic student who barely finished secondary school and spent much time as a teenager dreaming of being a great artist, sharing fantasies of greatness with his best friend, and drawing sketches showing how he would rebuild their town of Linz. Hitler's father died in 1903 and Klara was stricken with breast cancer in early 1907. Hitler tenderly nursed his mother in the weeks before her death in December and then used a small orphan's pension to support himself in Vienna, where he twice failed to pass the examination for admission to the Vienna Academy of Art. He spent the next six years, before moving to Munich in 1913, living from hand to mouth, sometimes earning money by drawing watercolor scenes and advertising posters, and arguing politics and dreaming up get-rich-quick schemes while living in shelters for homeless men.²

When World War I broke out in 1914, Hitler eagerly volunteered for service in the German army and spent four years on the Western Front, earning an Iron Cross First Class in 1918 as a result of his heroism in battle, an unusually high honor for a corporal. In

the army, Hitler found a sense of belonging he had missed since his mother's death. He was, therefore, particularly shocked when, in a hospital recovering from a mustard gas attack, he was told of Germany's defeat. Hitler returned to Munich, where conservative army officers gave him a job investigating "radical" groups. He was asked to speak to returning troops about the evils of socialism in a Germany that had suddenly (with the abdication of the kaiser on November 9, 1918) become a democratic republic. Munich and the rest of Bavaria soon became a center of right-wing opposition to the new national government; it was here that Hitler formulated his new ideology and discovered his power as a speechmaker. His beliefs, expressed in speeches after he joined the small German Workers Party and changed it into the NSDAP, included opposition to democracy and socialism. Popular fears of these ideas were made real by the fact that the largest party in the new German legislature was the Social Democratic Party. Although it was then a middle-class party committed to democracy, the Social Democrats (SPD) had historically promoted Marxist ideas of equality and revolution. They and other mainstream liberal parties were also responsible for the armistice of 1918 and the hated Versailles Treaty of 1919. The armistice was considered a "stab in the back" by right-wing nationalists, since German troops were still on French soil when it was signed. The treaty took territory from Germany, disarmed the country, and imposed oppressively high reparation payments. Hitler railed against all this, but the heart of his ideology and program—from its beginnings in 1919 to his final "testament" in 1945—was his hatred of the Jews.

In later years, Hitler claimed that he formed his antisemitic [anti-Jewish] views while living in Vienna. In his famous political autobiography, *Mein Kampf* [*My Struggle*], written from 1924 to 1926, he describes seeing "filthy" Jews and reading that Jews were not a religious group but an accursed race responsible for all moral and political evil. Some have argued that Hitler's antisemitism could be traced to his fear that one of his grandparents was Jewish, or to the fact that a Jewish physician had failed to cure his beloved mother of cancer. While we may never know the exact source of his deep hostility toward Jews, we do know that by the mid-1920s he had adopted and had begun to popularize a nineteenth-century antisemitic view of history as a struggle between superior and inferior races. The Aryans [his term for Germanic peoples] were locked in constant

struggle with lesser races, such as the Slavs. However, the lowest life-form for him was the Jews. The Aryans were the source of all real culture; the Jews were eternal "culture-destroyers." They threatened Germany both as capitalists who had sabotaged the German army in World War I and as the leaders of "Jewish Bolshevism," who wanted to destroy the country through socialist revolution. As early as August 1919, Hitler wrote that the "ultimate goal" of a strong Germany should be "the removal of the Jews altogether."³

Given the irrational nature of Hitler's ideology, we can understand his appeal only if we appreciate two additional things: the mood in Germany after World War I and Hitler's gifts as an orator. The defeat left many Germans disoriented and angry. The new republican government—with no troops of its own—had to rely upon the old army's conservative officers to put down several attempts at a communist revolution. Meanwhile, those same officers and their nationalist supporters, the people most responsible for war in 1914, had escaped responsibility for the defeat. Representatives of the new democratic parties were forced to sign the armistice and the hated Versailles Treaty because President Wilson of the United States refused to deal with the "militarists" who had caused the war. The new democratic Weimar Republic, called after the city where the constitution was written, appeared to be imposed on the people as a consequence of defeat. The new government was, therefore, unfairly associated in people's minds with defeat. Right-wing orators such as Hitler loudly blamed the "November criminals" for selling out the nation when, in fact, it was the leaders of the army in 1918 who had desperately requested an armistice so that the retreating army would not be destroyed. By 1923, German inability to pay reparations had led to French occupation of the industrial Ruhr valley. When the Weimar government printed money to pay the workers to go on strike rather than supply the French with iron and steel, it caused a serious inflation, which wiped out the savings of many middle-class Germans. Although the government survived this crisis, the fear it inspired caused many Germans to vote for extremist parties in the early 1930s, when the Great Depression began.

Hitler's oratorical skills allowed him to take advantage of the crisis in 1923. Although his November "Beer Hall Putsch" [an attempt to seize power] failed miserably, he earned much public sympathy when he skillfully turned his trial into an attack on his enemies, proclaiming himself the real patriot and his government

prosecutors the true traitors to Germany. A lenient court gave him the minimum five-year term and released him in eight months. It was while he lived comfortably in a Bavarian prison that he wrote *Mein Kampf*.⁴ As his court performance showed, Hitler was able to sense the mood of a crowd and respond to it, saying both what he intuitively sensed people wanted to hear and drawing emotional strength from their response. Some called this ability *Fingerspitzengefühl*, or "finger-tip feeling." He was also a great actor who could convince himself that he really believed what he was saying; this skill also helped him captivate and persuade an audience of thousands as easily as a single person.

His program and ability to appeal to the masses made Hitler a leader to be reckoned with when the depression hit Germany in 1930. With a party loyal to its Führer (leader) behind him, Hitler could exploit voters' fears of economic disaster at a time when the Weimar government seemed unable to end unemployment. In a September general election to the Reichstag [legislature], the Nazis increased their number of seats from twelve to 107; Communist representatives also increased from fifty-four to seventy-seven, giving Hitler more reason to warn against "Jewish Bolshevism." The next eighteen months saw more electoral successes for the Nazis. Because the Nazis and Communists refused to cooperate with the Social Democrats and other mainstream parties, the chancellor [head of government, appointed by the president, the formal head of state] had to rule by emergency decree instead of by securing majority votes in the Reichstag. The constitution allowed this, providing the president—at that time the aged World War I hero, Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg—countersigned the decrees. Even when Hitler's party became the largest in the Reichstag in July 1932, Hindenburg refused to appoint him chancellor, the normal course of action in a parliamentary system of government. Hindenburg disliked "the Bohemian corporal" and was aware of Hitler's announced goal of coming to power legally so that he could then replace the republic with a Nazi dictatorship. A series of conservative chancellors were unable to get Hitler to accept a lesser post than chancellor. Several, therefore, began to intrigue and conspire against each other over how best to "use" Hitler as the "front man" in a government that would really be run by traditional conservatives. They were sure they could control Hitler when they finally convinced Hindenburg to appoint him chancellor on January 30, 1933.

Hitler's political opponents fatally misjudged both their abilities and his. Within six months, all political parties except the National Socialists had disappeared. The Communists and many members of the Social Democratic Party were jailed; soon the other parties "voluntarily" dissolved themselves. Hitler moved quickly to consolidate his power, putting Nazis in charge at all levels of government and in education, the courts, and other professions. To allay fears, he moved more slowly in implementing other key domestic and foreign policy ideas. It was not until the 1935 Nuremberg Laws that Jews were denied citizenship and subjected to other forms of discrimination. All of these measures were enforced by a vigilant secret police (the Gestapo). In foreign policy, he spoke often of his peaceful intentions, even signing a non-aggression treaty with the Poles in 1934, in which he accepted Germany's loss of territory in the east after World War I. He had no intention of honoring this treaty any longer than necessary, and he had every intention of seeking to expand German territory at the expense of the Poles and others in Eastern Europe, including the Russians, as he had said very plainly in *Mein Kampf*.

He had also made his intention to solve the "Jewish problem" by driving them into exile, putting them in jails and concentration camps, and using other, more "thorough," ways clear from the beginning of his political career.⁶ Hitler's goals were clear and consistent. His timing was flexible, and this weakened possible opponents in Germany and abroad, who were pleased with full employment and the new sense of order that the Nazi regime brought. His ability to pursue his goals indirectly also eased the conscience of those who wanted to believe that Hitler's speeches were only designed to play to the prejudices of his uneducated followers. He didn't really mean what he said. He couldn't possibly be as dangerous as he sounded, they told themselves. But he did and he was. In 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain believed Hitler's statement that he only wanted to annex the German portion of Czechoslovakia (the Sudetenland) because the Germans there were being mistreated. He added that this was his last territorial claim in Europe and that he was only trying to rectify the wrongs of the Versailles Treaty. Western leaders believed him, even though he was lying about all of this. Conscience, Hitler once said, was "a Jewish invention, a blemish like circumcision."⁷

Germans and others finally found out what they were dealing with when Hitler, after peacefully annexing Austria in 1938 and the rest of Czechoslovakia in 1939, attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, beginning World War II when the French and British declared war on him in response. At first, things went well for Hitler. Poland was conquered in two weeks. The following spring, Hitler's armies moved west, conquering Holland in four days, Belgium in eight, and—to everyone's surprise—France in only six weeks. Hitler was unable to conquer Britain in 1940, however, and despite victories in the Mediterranean and North Africa, the Nazi juggernaut slowed by the end of 1941. Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941 but was unable to win a quick victory before winter set in. Undaunted, he declared war on the United States after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December. From that point on, Hitler's defeat was only a matter of time. His enemies could simply outproduce him. In 1943, for example, when German wartime production was beginning to reach its peak, Germany produced forty-three thousand war machines (from tanks and planes to artillery and battleships), compared with twenty-six thousand the previous year, in spite of constant British and American bombing of German cities. However, Allied (British, United States, Russian) production figures rose from one hundred thousand to one hundred fifty thousand during the same period.⁸

While the war was going on, however, Hitler did not forget his plan to eliminate the Jews. His war in the east coincided with the establishment of death camps, the largest in Poland, where millions of Jews from Germany and the conquered territories were shot, gassed, or worked to death. Hitler's willingness to use valuable manpower and railroad cars for the deportations and executions, which lasted up to the final weeks of the war, shows how seriously he took this ideological goal. The fact that millions of ordinary (non-Nazi) Germans were willing, even eager, to help him says something about Hitler's power over his nation and about the deeply rooted nature of antisemitism in German society at that time.⁹

Until Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker on April 30, 1945, he retained his power over Germany. German soldiers fought hopelessly on, until word of his death was announced, because he had forbidden them to surrender. His faithful architect and munitions minister, Albert Speer, said that only after Hitler's death "was

the spell broken, the magic extinguished."¹⁰ However, Nazism as a unique set of ideas did not survive Adolf Hitler. That is one important difference between the ideas of Hitler and Stalin, for the socialist idea and the Soviet Union did survive the death of Joseph Stalin, by almost fifty years. But then, Stalin did not create the idea of socialism the way Hitler created Nazism. Stalin learned his ideas and practices from his great teacher, Lenin; a review of Stalin's life can help us better understand the sort of student he was.

Joseph Stalin was not even Russian. The man who built a strong Russian state was born in Georgia, one of the small states in the Caucasus Mountains which became part of the Imperial Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. Born Iosif Dzhugashvili (he took the revolutionary name Stalin, "Man of Steel," years later), the future ruler was the son of a drunken, illiterate shoemaker, Vissarion, and his pious and independent wife, Ekaterina. Young Joseph was beaten by his father and, like Hitler, was raised by his mother, who had high hopes for him. She was determined that he become a priest. Ekaterina enrolled her son in a church-run elementary school, where the great self-confidence instilled by his mother helped him graduate at the head of his class in 1894. When he entered the theological seminary in nearby Tiflis (today Tbilisi), his ambitions changed. He resented the strict authority and the attempt to "Russify" the Georgian students at the seminary and, with others, turned to reading forbidden Western books, many about socialism. His grades dropped and, at the end of his third year, he was expelled for failing to show up for final examinations. It didn't matter; by this time, he had decided on a new career—that of professional revolutionary.¹¹

Since class differences and hatreds were very strong in Russia, many idealistic young people were attracted to the ideas of nineteenth-century German thinker Karl Marx. After observing the development of new classes during the Industrial Revolution, and the conditions of the factory workers, Marx predicted that these workers (proletarians) would overthrow the capitalist classes (bourgeoisie) when the time was right. Then the process of creating a truly classless society could begin. By 1899, when Stalin became a full-time revolutionary in the ranks of the Social Democrats, as the Marxists were known, a split was beginning to develop. A more traditional group felt that a workers' revolution had to wait until the development of industrial capitalism was more advanced. Russia's process of industrialization began only in the late nineteenth

century. Another group wanted to speed up the process through the use of a dedicated corps of elite revolutionary leaders who would become the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and would organize the workers to immediately destroy the capitalist classes, not through legal means such as used by the Social Democrats in Germany, but through violent revolution. The leader of this second group was Vladimir I. Lenin, a determined and calculating person who challenged the older view at a party congress in 1903. When he won on several issues, he began to call his group the Bolsheviks (meaning "majority" in Russian) and his opponents Mensheviks ("minority"). The names stuck and young Stalin, unlike many of his fellow Georgian revolutionaries, was immediately attracted to the ideas and radical program of Lenin, who became a father-figure to the man whose father had disappeared when Stalin was eleven.

Between 1900 and 1917, Stalin organized frequently bloody demonstrations of workers in his native Caucasus, hid from the Tsarist police, and was connected with a dramatic bank robbery (called by the party an "expropriation") to secure funds for the party. During these years, he was arrested eight times, sent into exile in northern Russia seven times, and escaped six times. His last exile was in Siberia from 1913 to 1917; he was freed from this only by the March Revolution of 1917 that overthrew the Tsarist government.

Stalin met his hero, Lenin, at a Social Democratic Party congress in Finland in 1905. During these years in exile, Lenin came to appreciate the younger man's hard work and ruthlessness.¹² Stalin was attracted to Lenin during these years because both of them, like Hitler, had dualistic views of the world. "Either the bourgeoisie with its capitalism, or the proletariat with its socialism," Stalin wrote later: there could be no middle ground. This "either-or" view led Lenin to reject compromise and insist on a further revolution when he returned to Russia from abroad in April 1917. The liberals who had taken over after the tsar was overthrown were not ready to eliminate capitalism—or end the disastrous Russian participation in World War I which had caused the tsar's downfall. Lenin was willing to do both, even if it took a bloody civil war. Stalin admired this "hardness" in Lenin and would later identify everything he did as Leninism. He identified himself and his policies with Lenin's brand of socialism in the same way that Hitler identified himself and his policies with Germany. One could not differ with either man without being seen as a traitor.¹³

Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks were successful in November 1917 in overthrowing the liberal Provisional Government and, in the next five years, gave Stalin further examples of his hardness. Lenin's first action was to suspend an assembly that had been elected earlier to write a constitution. Since he had secured power by promising the people "peace, land, and bread," his next hard decision was to sign a peace treaty with the Germans in March 1918. This Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which surrendered a third of Russia's people and farmland and over half of its industry,¹⁴ was opposed by most of the other Bolsheviks, who had to be persuaded by Lenin that the Russian people would overthrow them if they didn't end the war. Since many in the Russian upper and middle classes opposed Bolshevik plans to give *their* land to the peasants, the Bolshevik leaders had to fight a bitter civil war for three years against the conservative White armies in order to survive.

During this time, Stalin, who had become almost Lenin's second in command during 1917, was eclipsed in the leadership by Lev Trotsky, the "organizer of victory," a brilliant military leader. Stalin, a quiet, behind-the-scenes organizer, disliked Trotsky, who was a popular, colorful orator. Stalin also distrusted Trotsky's idea that the revolution had to spread and become a world revolution (he especially hoped for a socialist government in Germany) before it could really succeed in Russia. Stalin was becoming a believer in what he would later call "socialism in one country"—Russia. Lenin respected the different skills of each of these men and tried to end their feuding. Their fighting was particularly nasty during the civil war, when Stalin insisted on military command and in the battle against the Poles in 1920 made some decisions which resulted in a Red Army defeat. In 1922, Lenin recognized Stalin's organizational skills and devotion to work by making him the General Secretary of the Communist Party, responsible for supervising and recommending appointment of party officials throughout the country. At the same time, he offered Trotsky a position as vice-chair of a state body, the Council of People's Commissars (the cabinet), which would have put him in line to succeed Lenin, who was the chairman. Trotsky refused "for obscure reasons."¹⁵ It was a mistake.

Lenin suffered his first stroke in May 1922 and died in January 1924. Although he could not appoint a successor, mainly because his position as leader was based more upon his charisma [ability to inspire allegiance and devotion in his followers] than on any office

he held, he did leave a final "testament" which recommended, among other things, that Stalin be removed as general secretary of the party because of his "rudeness" and difficulty in getting along with others. Since Stalin was obviously not charismatic, his career might have ended there if he had not been able to use his position as general secretary to pack party meetings with his supporters. He was also able to use his political skills to manipulate and play on the fears of other party leaders, Trotsky, Grigori Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, and Nikolai Bukharin. In 1924, Zinoviev and Kamenev supported Stalin's continuation as general secretary because they feared Trotsky's power. A year later, they attacked Stalin at the party congress, accusing him of trying to take Lenin's place as *vozhd'* [a term for unquestioned leader, similar to Hitler's title of *Führer* in Germany], but were defeated, with Trotsky remaining aloof. By 1926, Trotsky had joined the other two, but Stalin's hand-picked congress delegates expelled all three from the party in 1927.

During all this, Stalin remained allied with Bukharin, then editor of the party newspaper, *Pravda*, and a person who also opposed Trotsky's emphasis on world revolution. However, Stalin and Bukharin disagreed on policy toward the peasants, though they covered this up until 1928. Bukharin supported the New Economic Policy (NEP) that Lenin had established in 1921. Instead of seizing grain from the peasants to feed the cities, as was done during the civil war, the NEP restored a money economy and allowed peasants to sell any surplus beyond what the government needed. Using a grain shortage in 1928 as an excuse, Stalin moved to eliminate NEP as a concession to capitalism; Bukharin's opposition allowed Stalin to expel him from the Politburo (the decision-making body in the party) in 1929. Throughout this process of consolidating his power, Stalin consistently reminded party members of Lenin's calls for unity and moderation, even as he was preparing to undertake more radical measures against the peasants. In 1927, knowing his men now controlled the party congress, he offered to resign as general secretary to honor's Lenin's wish. The congress unanimously asked him to stay.¹⁶

With virtually unlimited power by 1929, Stalin could begin his "second revolution," one that would make him as great as Lenin, whose embalmed body was on display near the Kremlin. Between 1929 and 1935, Stalin undertook a massive program to collectivize agriculture and an equally massive program of industrialization

through a series of Five Year Plans. His goal was to catch up with the “enemies” of socialism in the West. It worked, up to a point. Steel production, for example, went from 4.4 million tons in 1928 to 6 million tons in 1933 and, by the end of 1934, 90 percent of the farmland in the USSR was in the collective farms. But the costs were great. The kulaks (wealthier peasants) were eliminated as a class; those who resisted having their property collectivized were sent to labor camps or shot. Two hundred forty thousand kulak families were exiled by 1933; many of those died. Famines resulted, but the resulting deaths were denied by the government. Up to 4 million slaves, 10 percent of the total labor force, worked at any one time in the labor camps. Many millions of them died as well during the Stalin years.¹⁷

Just as many Germans supported Hitler’s large-scale murders (which were different from Stalin’s because you can change your class easier than you can your “race”), so, too, many Russians supported Stalin’s policies to build a strong socialist state in Russia, even with the deaths involved. Both inside and outside the Communist Party, many took the idea of class struggle very seriously and had been troubled by the NEP compromise with capitalism. One story told how two young boys, sons of a champion metalworker, threw a classmate under the wheels of a streetcar because he was the son of a doctor and, thus, their class enemy. In addition, many of the newer party members recruited by Stalin liked his emphasis on building a strong, industrialized Russia able to compete with foreign capitalist states. And Stalin was always able to explain to his people exactly why Lenin would have wanted him to do what he was doing.¹⁸ His actions were—or were made to seem—ideologically correct.

Less easy to explain in ideological terms was Stalin’s decision to “purge,” or “liquidate,” nearly all of the Old Bolsheviks (those who had worked with Lenin) in a series of “show trials.” Until the 1930s, those who fell from favor were expelled from the party and, in serious cases, exiled from the country. But, beginning in 1934 and continuing until 1938, Stalin accused former political enemies as well as military leaders of treason, made them confess to things they had not done in carefully scripted trials, then had them jailed and/or shot. Scholars explain this by pointing out that Stalin was both paranoid, fearing numerous secret enemies, and vengeful. One writes that “Stalin was unhappy at not being able to convince

everyone, ‘himself included,’ that he was greater than everyone”; therefore, anyone who questioned—or even seemed to question—his perfection was seen as a class enemy. After all, since Stalin perfectly embodied the Bolshevik cause, anyone who was not slavishly loyal had to be eliminated.¹⁹ Whatever the cause, this aspect of Stalin’s personality created an atmosphere of terror that had people shooting themselves or jumping out of windows when they heard the NKVD (secret police) knock on their door in the middle of the night.

Stalin’s purges of military leaders help explain why Hitler’s armies were able to march hundreds of miles into Soviet territory and take 3.5 million prisoners in the first six months after they attacked in June 1941. Stalin’s people did recover; they had population, geography, and climate (a vast country and the Russian winter that had defeated Napoleon in 1812) on their side, not to mention help from Britain and the United States. During the war, Stalin downplayed his socialist goals and appealed to Russians to remember how they had defeated Western armies in the past. World War II became the “Great Patriotic War.” These were years of triumph for the grandson of Georgian serfs. He was accepted as an equal by President Roosevelt of the United States and Winston Churchill of Great Britain and, at the end of the war, his troops remained in Eastern Europe, creating, in effect, the largest empire in Russian history. When the Western leaders came to him, at Yalta in February 1945, to divide up the spoils of Hitler’s empire, it was, in the words of one historian, “that moment in Stalin’s career when reality came closest to confirming his image of himself.”²⁰

The postwar years, however, saw Stalin return to the policies of repression, terror, and paranoia that marked his rule in the 1930s. Returning prisoners of war were told they were traitors for allowing themselves to be captured. For that, and for being tainted with exposure to foreign ideas, they were jailed. Cooperation with his former allies ended, the “iron curtain” went up, and the Cold War began. In 1953, he was—many believe—on the verge of launching a new set of purges. Some Jewish physicians had already been accused of poisoning Soviet leaders and were to be tried when Stalin’s death, from a stroke on March 5, intervened. Three years after his death, the new Russian leader, Nikita Khrushchev, made a “secret speech” at the party congress, condemning Stalin’s purges of the 1930s and his “cult of personality”—but not the destruction

of the peasants or the deadly labor camps. It was not until the Soviet Union itself was near collapse in the late 1980s that other criticisms were heard. What may surprise us is that, even today in the former Soviet Union, there are people willing to display Stalin's picture in parades and lament the "good old days" of his dictatorship. At least Russia was strong—and orderly—in those days.²¹

All told, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin seem to qualify for a high position on any list of the ten individuals who really made the greatest difference in history. Historians and political scientists often join these two men and their governments together under the label "totalitarian." By this, they mean that both states were ruled by a single political party, tried to control the social and intellectual as well as the political lives of their citizens, and used systematic terror to do this. While this term helps us see how these two dictatorships were similar, it also obscures the real differences. No other totalitarian state was as systematically racist and antisemitic as Hitler's Germany. No other totalitarian state engaged in the bizarre purge trials which Stalin established in the 1930s. It is one thing to think about getting rid of all the Jews in Europe or to think about how nice it would be to destroy all your class enemies. To be ruthless enough to actually do these things is another matter. When we look at what they did and try to understand what motivated them—consciously or unconsciously—to do it, it is, in the words of historian Alan Bullock, "hard to imagine" anyone but Hitler doing what he did and "equally difficult to imagine any other Soviet leader than Stalin" doing the things he did.²² Others thought about doing such things, but Hitler and Stalin acted. Even harder to explain than what they did is why so many sane, sensible people let them do it.

Notes

1. Estimates of the number of Jews destroyed in the Holocaust range from 5.6 to 6.9 million, out of a total European Jewish population in 1939 of 11 million. Millions of others, including Gypsies and various disabled peoples, were also killed in this attempt to rid Europe of inferior or "subhuman" peoples. See Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), Appendix III, 989; for the full scope and context, see also *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts*

- and *Critical Views*, ed. Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, Israel W. Charny (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1997).
2. Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, rev. ed. (London: Odhams Books Ltd, 1964), 33–36.
 3. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939), 73–78; see also the chapter on "Nation and Race," 389–455; Ian Kershaw, *Hitler* (London: Longmans, 1991), 19–28; Bullock, *Parallel Lives*, 71.
 4. Joachim Fest, *Hitler*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Random House, 1974), 182–196.
 5. Bullock, *A Study in Tyranny*, 377–378.
 6. See Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's Weltanschauung [Worldview]*, trans. Herbert Arnold (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), 27–66.
 7. Bullock, *Parallel Lives*, 386.
 8. Bullock, *Parallel Lives*, 802.
 9. While there has long been agreement on the importance of anti-semitism in Hitler's ideology, only relatively recently did Daniel Goldhagen argue for an "eliminationist antisemitism" among the German people as a whole. See his controversial book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners, Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).
 10. Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 488–89.
 11. See Robert Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 64–91.
 12. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*, 91–108; see also the excellent brief "Chronology of Stalin's Life" in Robert H. McNeal, *Stalin, Man and Ruler* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 317–323.
 13. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*, 119, 130–143; McNeal, *Stalin*, 314.
 14. See Bullock, *Parallel Lives*, 62; the Russians retrieved this territory when the Germans were defeated less than a year later in the West.
 15. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*, 336.
 16. Bullock, *Parallel Lives*, 175–176, 205.
 17. Bullock, *Parallel Lives*, 256–395; Edvard Radzinsky, *Stalin*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 249.
 18. McNeal, *Stalin*, 312; Radzinsky, *Stalin*, 232; Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*, 321–324; Bullock, *Parallel Lives*, 202.
 19. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary*, 439, 450–451.
 20. Bullock, *Parallel Lives*, 875.
 21. Radzinsky, *Stalin*, 583–584.
 22. Bullock, *Parallel Lives*, 977.