CONTENTS

REVOLUTIONARY UNDERGROUND

STAYING THE COURSE

FROM OUTSIDE IN

THE STEEP PATH TO POWER

INTRODUCTION

FORTUNE'S KNAVE

> No one can be regarded as a born criminal. One cannot look at Stalin in the same light in 1918, in 1924, or in 1937. It is the same person, and yet it is not. In the ten years after he succeeded Lenin, he changed markedly. Yet that is the difficulty of creating his political portrait: while apparently struggling for the ideals of socialism—however twistedly understood—he committed crime after crime.
>
> —DMITRII VOLKOGONOV,
> *STALIN: TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY* (1991)

> Do not expect more from the truth than it actually contains.
>
> —RUSSIAN PROVERB

In the spring of 1924, Stalin's nemesis and rival, Lev Trotsky, told the "Old Bolshevik" Vladimir Smirnov, "Stalin will become the dictator of the USSR." "Stalin?" Smirnov reacted. "But he is a mediocrity, a colorless non-entity." "Mediocrity, yes," Trotsky mused, "non-entity, no. The dialectics of history have already hooked him and will raise him up. He is needed by all of them—by the tired radicals, by the bureaucrats, by the Nepmen, the kulaks, the upstarts, the sneaks, by all the worms that are crawling out of the upturned soil of the manured revolution."[1]

Stalin continues to fascinate—the central mystery within the riddle inside the enigma that was the Soviet Union. Ordinary in many ways, hardly a mediocrity, he rose to extraordinary heights. Toward the end of his life he was arguably the most powerful individual in the world. Yet at various earlier times he was seen as a "gray blur," "the man who missed the revolution," a "mediocrity" hooked by history. He was

Lenin's "marvelous Georgian," in wartime the "Generalissimo," and still later "history's villain."

Yet the telling of Stalin's life story has always been more than biography. There is wonder at the achievement—the son of a Georgian cobbler ascending the heights of world power, the architect of an industrial revolution and the destruction of millions of the people he ruled, the leader of the state that stopped the bloody expansion of fascism. Stalin's story is the story of the making of the Soviet Union and a particular vision of what he called socialism. His biographers have often placed historical imagination at the service of a specific politics of eroding (or lauding) the Stalinist inheritance. Such a life story cannot be separated from an evaluation of that life's work. In twenty-first century Russia visions of Stalin are deployed to justify yet another slide into authoritarianism, while in the West the entirety of the Soviet experience is often reduced to Stalin and Stalinism, the Great Purges, and the gulag. The drama of his life, the achievements and tragedies, are so morally and emotionally charged that they challenge the usual practices of historical objectivity and scholarly neutrality. As his heirs and victims have tried to make sense of Stalin, tales or rumors have been used to illuminate the dark corners of the Soviet past. Imaginative portraits, like those by great novelists like Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Vasilii Grossman, doubtless help us to sense the interior of the dictator's mind but contain fictions or at best half-fictions.[2] When it comes to Stalin, gossip is reported as fact, legend provides meaning, and scholarship gives way to sensationalist popular literature with tangential reference to the reliable sources.

Most elusive and obscure have been Stalin's early years—before he was Stalin. Here the lasting fascination with the demon dictator is matched by an irresistible temptation to make his childhood and youth "useful" by investing them with the first signs of the paranoid revolutionary-from-above of the 1930s, the arch criminal who presided over the death of millions. Those who "know" the autocratic Stalin of totalitarian Russia have read back the characteristics of the General Secretary into the young Stalin, emphasizing what fits—violence, paranoia, arrogance, and the need to dominate—and rejecting what does not—romanticism, literary sensibility, love for his homeland, and

revolutionary idealism. As important as Stalin's early life was to the formation of his personality, the difficulties of reconstructing it from the few extant memoirs of his youth and scanty available documentation have led sometimes to flimsily built psychoanalytic speculation and at other times to fanciful arguments that Stalin must have been an agent for the tsar's *Okhrana* (political police).[3]

From the earliest attempts at understanding Stalin, biographers have drawn conclusions about the mature Stalin from the psychological, not to mention physical, blows suffered by the young Ioseb Jughashvili. His boyhood friend, Ioseb Iremashvili, later a political opponent, composed the first memoir of Stalin's childhood and made the primary psychological deduction later followed by other biographers: "Undeserved, terrible beatings made the boy as hard and heartless as his father himself. Since all men who had authority over others either through power or age reminded him of his father, there soon arose a feeling of revenge against all men who stood above him. From his youth the realization of his thoughts of revenge became the goal toward which everything was aimed." Stalin evidently evaluated his parents' disciplining differently from Iremashvili. When popular German biographer Emil Ludwig, known for his interviews with the political celebrities of the interwar years, met with Stalin in the Kremlin, he indelicately broached the issue of parental abuse: "What pushed you into opposition? Perhaps the bad treatment by your parents?" Stalin did not take the bait, however. "No," he answered. "My parents were uneducated people, but they treated me not badly at all."[4]

Reducing the complexity of the biographical subject to a single explanatory key, in this case parental abuse, impoverishes explanation, and most historians have been suspicious of a method that leaves so much out—culture and context, politics and ideas—and renders stated motivations suspect, reducing them to psychological functions (rationalization, compensation, sublimation). Stalin is without doubt one of the most tempting and, at the same time, least hospitable subjects for a biographer. Not particularly introspective, he left few intimate letters, no secret diary, and many dubious witnesses to his inner life. Moreover, Bolshevik political culture was hostile to open personal expression and

imposed on Stalin and other adherents an enforced modesty. Denial of the importance of self was part of the Social Democratic tradition, and even as a grotesque cult of Stalin's personality grew to gargantuan proportions Stalin would continue, disingenuously, to claim that he disliked all the fuss. At different times in his life Stalin created distinct narratives about who he was. In the 1930s that narrative drew parallels with Peter the Great and then with Ivan the Terrible. His earlier narratives were romances about Georgia, the revolutionary hero, the practical man of the underground, the hardened, steeled Bolshevik, who in time became the Lenin loyalist, the man of the moderate middle, and soon afterward the radical transformer of Russia's reality.

Yet for all his dissembling and deception, his playacting and posturing, Stalin revealed himself through what he did and said in public and—now that archives are open and more reliable testimonies have come forth—in private as well. For the first time biographers are able to place the man in his world, show his limits as well as talents, and work toward a portrait that might explain the seemingly inexplicable. Stalin was an exceptional individual because of what he became and what he did, the positions he occupied in a tumultuous time, but like many people in higher politics he was at the same time quite ordinary, a small man placed in extraordinary circumstances.

In this study Stalin's psychological evolution is treated as the interplay between the boy from Georgia's developing character and the social and cultural environments through which Soso Jughashvili—later Koba, still later Stalin—moved. Each of these environments—the ethnocultural setting of Georgia, the revolutionary intelligentsia, the Marxist movement, the underground, prison and exile, on to the upper circles of Russian Social Democracy, the fire of civil war, the inner workings of the Soviet political system, and the political cultures of socialism—imprinted Stalin, changing him along the way. As life's experiences molded him, what he was becoming modified what he had been. He was not born a criminal and did not become a Caucasian bandit. Rather than a gangster out to enrich himself, he was both the product of and participant in an evolving culture of the underground revolutionary. Idealism and ideology, as well as resentment and ambition, impelled him to endure the risks

and recklessness of a political outlaw. He hardened himself, accepted the necessity of deception, ruthlessness, and violence—all these means justified by the end of social and political liberation. This is the story of how a political revolutionary was made, as well as the emergence of the revolutionary movement, its possibilities, ambitions, and trials.

Stalin lived almost exactly as long before the revolution as after, and the first third of his life was spent in Georgia. As a Georgian who rose to the top of the Russian Communist movement and as the architect of the Soviet multinational state, Stalin's story is part of a larger story of empires and nations, new forms of imperial construction and national ambitions. Born, raised, and educated in Georgia, this was the first cultural environment he experienced. Yet it is hard to claim that Jughashvili became Stalin because of something essentially Georgian, as there is no archetypical Georgian.[5] His boyhood country was a lively arena in which people defined and defended what they considered to be their culture and its values, often bitterly disagreeing with other members of the same ethnicity. Nationalists like to think of ethnic culture as harmonious and consistent, with those inside that culture sharing characteristics that differ radically from those outside. But Georgia was part of a larger Caucasian cultural sphere and embedded in the imperial Russian polity with its own cultural and social influences. Among Georgians values and behaviors were simultaneously shared and contested. Older traditions contended with novel divisions of power and shifts in status and gender hierarchies. Poets and politicians made claims about what was authentically "Georgian." In the half century before Stalin's birth there were those ready to "police" the boundaries of Georgian culture, tell others what was authentic and proper, and discipline deviants. Even as aspects of Stalin's ethnic culture were breaking down and being reformulated, while intellectuals turned their attention to what appeared about to be lost, young Soso Jughashvili, influenced by his doting mother, identified intensely with Georgia, its practices and preferences, the beautiful intricacies and cadences of its language, its music, and its hypermasculine gender regime.

A more mature Koba eventually broke through what he found to be the confining limits of nationality to identify with an explicitly

anti-nationalist political party and its socialist future. In rapid succession Soso left the largely Georgian town of his birth and entered other cultural milieus: the seminary, the intelligentsia, the movement, and the party. By his twenty-first birthday he had become a professional revolutionary defined by a new culture, the political culture of Russian Social Democracy, with its specific forms of moral and personal behavior, its idealized self-representations of what constituted an *intelligent* (a radical political intellectual), and its elaborate codes of loyalty and sacrifice.

Elaborating the cultural worlds through which the young Stalin passed makes possible a fuller understanding of the sources of Stalin's particular psychology and the determinants of his personal and political trajectory. Understanding the man comes from setting him in his time and place, even though some parts of his inner workings undoubtedly remain elusive, buried in regions to which historians are not admitted. Poverty was the condition of the world into which he came. The constant and demanding attention and fierce adulation that his single present parent, his mother, focused on Soso fed his social resentment at his place in the scheme of things. Aware of being marginalized and at the same time talented, Soso found that hard work and discipline moved him to the front of the class. His inheritance from both parents was ambition.

The usual biographical narrative, with its organic continuity between boy, young adult, and mature man, is challenged by the reconstruction of the available fragments of Stalin's life that suggest a much more disjointed evolution in which Soso/Koba/Stalin shed one identity and took on another. The obedient child and priest-in-training became a rebel; the Georgian patriot became an assimilated Russian, though only in part and primarily in his public posture; the militant Bolshevik at times took on the coloring of a moderate. As he moved physically and psychologically away from Georgia, Stalin left behind a culture in which one's sense of personhood derived from family, friends, and nation and entered a world in which one defined one's own nature in line with a particular understanding of historical direction and the unforgiving imperatives of politics. By becoming a rebel against the existing order,

revolutionaries like Stalin declared war on constituted authorities. For Marxists in the Russian Empire politics were less about compromise and persuasion and more about the violent, unforgiving confrontations found on the battlefield. A logic of war prevailed, one that required (sometimes with regret) the use of violence. Responding both to inner needs and external possibilities and challenges, deeply changed by the experiences of the seminary, underground, prison, revolution, civil war, and political power, the Stalin that emerged on the world stage was both a product of the successive cultures through which he passed and an actor making choices and defining himself in unprecedented and unpredictable historical circumstances.

During the Cold War, battalions of Soviet and Western scholars explored the history of Russian Social Democracy, the Marxist movement that split irrevocably into Bolshevism and Menshevism by 1905 and whose radical wing led by Vladimir Lenin came to power in October 1917. The stories they told were diametrically opposed to one another, each a product of the intellectual and political imperatives of their respective worlds. With the fall of the Soviet Union interest in the intricacies of the political struggles of the Marxist factions and their meanings and influences on the Soviet future evaporated. Yet at the same moment the less contentious environment of the post-Soviet period, along with the opening of Soviet archives, made possible a reevaluation of the history of Russian (and Georgian) Marxism and their respective and distinct labor movements. Since those movements and the Marxist underground were the major breeding grounds for Stalin and those around him, I have undertaken a fresh reading of the history of those movements out of which the Soviet experiment and Stalin himself emerged.

Understanding Stalin's psychological makeup, the cognitive understandings and the emotions that drove him, in these spatial and temporal contexts and influences has involved the careful construction of a mosaic of diverse pieces of information—from the variety of archival documents, official and unofficial memoirs, even photographs—until a legible portrait emerged. My aim was to evoke from that mosaic a credible and convincing interpretation of the evolution of the boy, Soso

Jughashvili, through the young Koba to the mature Stalin—an elucidation of his personal, psychological, and political formation that could shed light on his motivations and choices. In the end exploring where he was and when is fundamental to understanding who Stalin was, why he acted and thought as he did, and how he evolved into the confident, fearless rebel determined to lead.

Throughout this book I present a variety of alternative views of Stalin produced by his friends and enemies, biographers and hagiographers—many of them in the epigraphs opening each chapter—in order to illustrate how Stalin has stirred contradictory commentaries on his character, both by contemporaries and historians. In contrast to other biographies I have left narrative gaps where no available material exists and avoided speculating about what he "must have felt" or "might have thought." This book provides the evidence from which both a compelling story can be told as well as a caution that the line between history and fiction is too easily crossed. It also navigates between disciplines, to maintain the historian's sensitivity to time and place and the anomalies, particularities, and accidents that make up the deep texture of the past, while at the same time borrowing from political and social science concepts, techniques, and insights that can make forests out of empirical trees. In this way we might get closer to unraveling the deeper mysteries of Stalin and understand why a revolution committed to human emancipation ended up in dictatorship and terror.

INDEX