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STALIN

**STEPHEN
KOTKIN**

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Steeltown, USSR: Soviet Society in the Gorbachev Era

*Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist
Establishment*

STALIN

VOLUME I

PARADOXES OF POWER,

1878-1928

STEPHEN KOTKIN

PENGUIN PRESS
NEW YORK | 2014



PENGUIN PRESS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014



USA • Canada • UK • Ireland • Australia New Zealand • India • South Africa • China
penguin.com

A Penguin Random House Company

First published by Penguin Press, a member of Penguin Group (USA) LLC, 2014

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eBook ISBN: 978-0-698-17010-0

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Version_1

for John Birkelund

businessman, benefactor, fellow historian

Those that understood him
smiled at one another and
shook their heads. But, for
mine own part, it was
Greek to me.

Shakespeare, *Julius
Caesar* (1599)

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Stalin, in three volumes, tells the story of Russia's power in the world and Stalin's power in Russia, recast as the Soviet Union. In some ways the book builds toward a history of the world from Stalin's office (at least that is what it has felt like to write it). Previously, I authored a case study of the Stalin epoch from a street-level perspective, in the form of a total history of a single industrial town. The office perspective, inevitably, is less granular in examination of the wider society—the little tactics of the habitat—but the regime, too, constituted a kind of society. Moreover, my earlier book was concerned with power, where it comes from and in what ways and with what consequences it is exercised, and so is this one. The story emanates from Stalin's office but not from his point of view. As we observe him seeking to wield the levers of power across Eurasia and beyond, we need to keep in mind that others before him had grasped the Russian wheel of state, and that the Soviet Union was located in the same difficult geography and buffeted by the same great-power neighbors as imperial Russia, although geopolitically, the USSR was even more challenged because some former tsarist territories broke off into hostile independent states. At the same time, the Soviet state had a more modern and ideologically infused authoritarian institutional makeup than its tsarist predecessor, and it had a leader in Stalin who stands out in his uncanny fusion of zealous Marxist convictions and great-power sensibilities, of sociopathic tendencies and exceptional diligence and resolve. Establishing the timing and causes of the emergence of that personage, discernible by 1928,

constitutes one task. Another entails addressing the role of a single individual, even Stalin, in the gigantic sweep of history.

Whereas studies of grand strategy tend to privilege large-scale structures and sometimes fail to take sufficient account of contingency or events, biographies tend to privilege individual will and sometimes fail to account for the larger forces at play. Of course, a marriage of biography and history can enhance both. This book aims to show in detail how individuals, great and small, are both enabled and constrained by the relative standing of their state vis-à-vis others, the nature of domestic institutions, the grip of ideas, the historical conjuncture (war or peace; depression or boom), and the actions or inactions of others. Even dictators like Stalin face a circumscribed menu of options. Accident in history is rife; unintended consequences and perverse outcomes are the rule. Reordered historical landscapes are mostly not initiated by those who manage to master them, briefly or enduringly, but the figures who rise to the fore do so precisely because of an aptitude for seizing opportunities. Field Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke the Elder (1800–91), chief of the Prussian and then German general staff for thirty-one years, rightly conceived of strategy as a “system of expedients” or improvisation, that is, an ability to turn unexpected developments created by others or by happenstance to one’s advantage. We shall observe Stalin extracting more from situations, time and again, than they seemed to promise, demonstrating cunning and resourcefulness. But Stalin’s rule also reveals how, on extremely rare occasions, a single individual’s decisions can radically transform an entire country’s political and socioeconomic structures, with global repercussions.

This is a work of both synthesis and original research over many years in many historical archives and libraries in Russia as well as the most important related repositories in the United States. Research in Russia is richly rewarding, but it can also be Gogol-esque: some archives are entirely “closed” to researchers yet materials from them circulate all the same; access is suddenly denied for materials that the same researcher previously consulted or that can be read in scanned files that researchers share. Often it

is more efficient to work on archival materials outside the archives. This book is also based upon exhaustive study of scans as well as microfilms of archival material and published primary source documents, which for the Stalin era have proliferated almost beyond a single individual's capacity to work through them. Finally, the book draws upon an immense international scholarly literature. It is hard to imagine what Part I of this volume would look like without its reliance on the scrupulous work of Aleksandr Ostrovskii concerning the young Stalin, for example, or Part III without Valentin Sakharov's trenchant challenge to the conventional wisdom on Vladimir Lenin's so-called Testament. It was Francesco Benvenuti who presciently demonstrated the political weakness of Trotsky already during the Russian civil war, findings that I amplify in chapter 8; it was Jeremy Smith who finally untangled the knot of the Georgian affair in the early 1920s involving Stalin and Lenin, which readers will find integrated with my own discoveries in chapter 11. Myriad other scholars deserve to be singled out; they are, like those above, recognized in the endnotes. (Most of the scholars I cite base their arguments on archival or other primary source documents, and often I have consulted the original documents myself, either before or after reading their works.) As for our protagonist, he offers little help in getting to the bottom of his character and decision making.

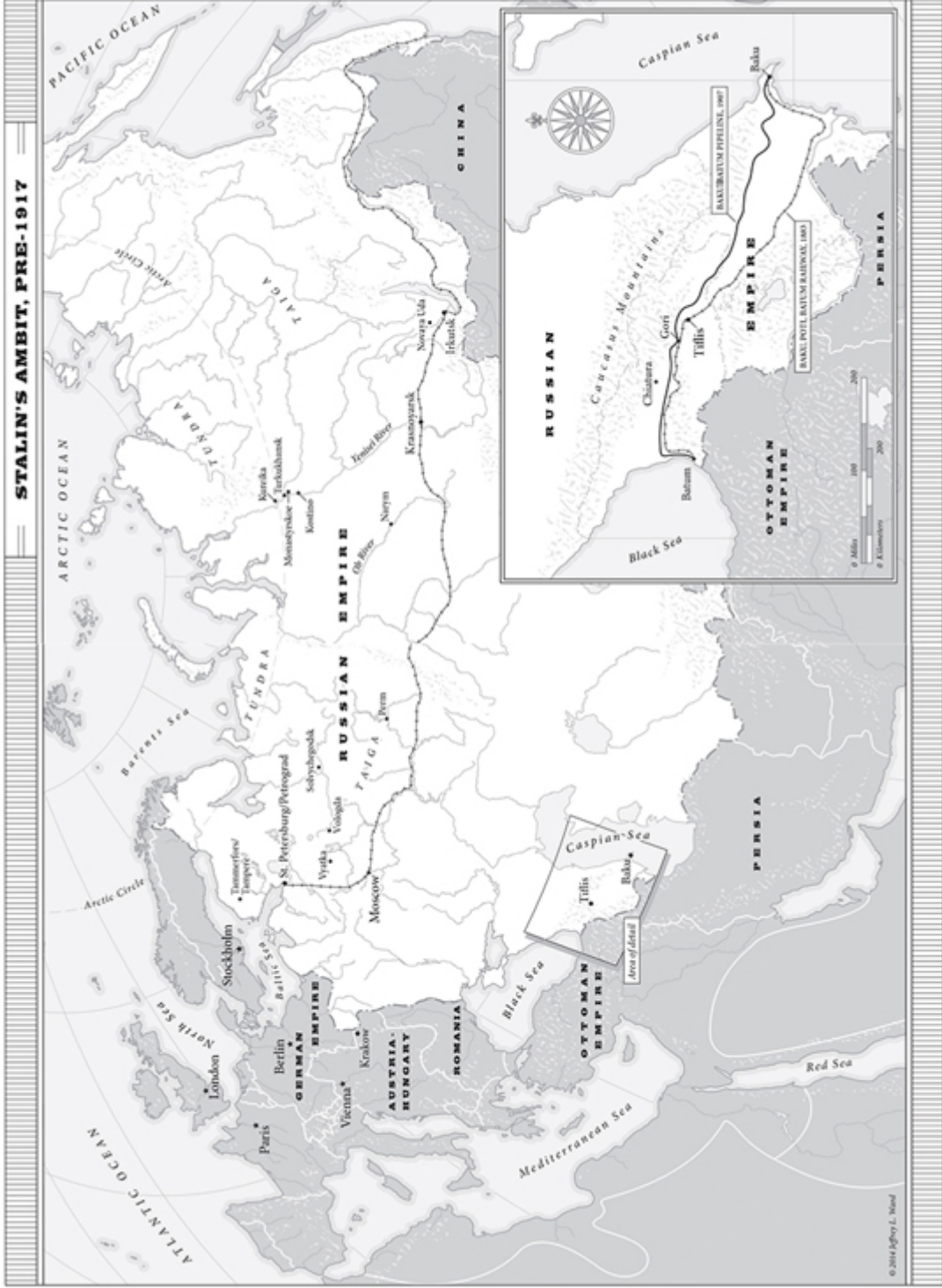
Stalin originated with my literary agent, Andrew Wylie, whose vision is justly legendary. My editor at Penguin Press, Scott Moyers, painstakingly went through the entire manuscript with a brilliantly deft touch, and taught me a great deal about books. Simon Winder, my editor in the UK, posed penetrating questions and made splendid suggestions. Colleagues—too numerous to thank by name—generously offered incisive criticisms, which vastly improved the text. My research and writing have been buoyed by an array of remarkable institutions as well, from Princeton University, where I have been privileged to teach since 1989 and been granted countless sabbaticals, to the New York Public Library, whose treasures I have been mining for multiple decades and where I benefited extraordinarily from a year at its Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers under Jean Strouse. I have been the very

fortunate recipient of foundation grants, including those from the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Perhaps the place from which I have drawn the greatest support has been the Hoover Institution, at Stanford University, where I started out as a visiting graduate student from the University of California at Berkeley, eventually becoming a visiting faculty participant in Paul Gregory's annual Soviet archives workshop, a National Fellow, and now an affiliated Research Fellow. Hoover's comprehensive archives and rare-book library, now skillfully directed by Eric Wakin, remain unmatched anywhere outside Moscow for study of the Russian-Soviet twentieth century.

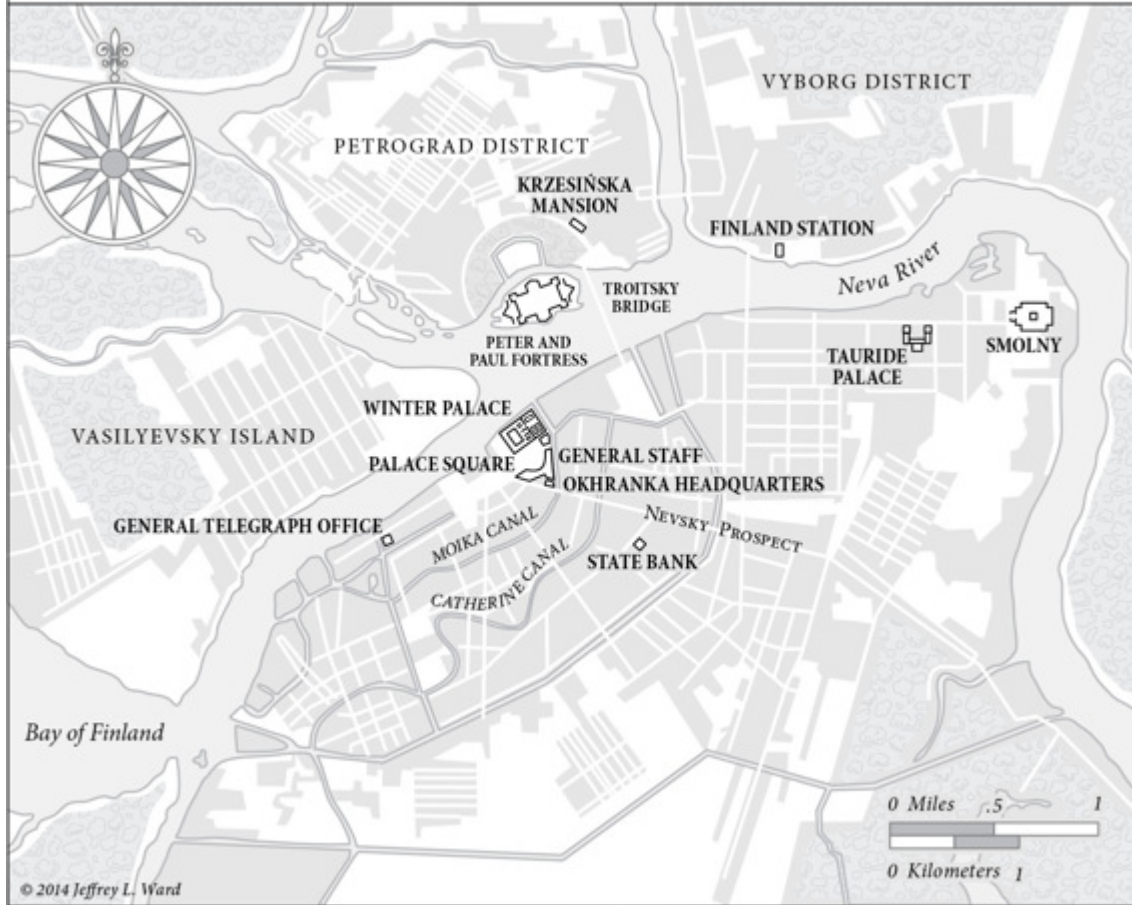
RUSSIAN EURASIA C. 1913



STALIN'S AMBIT, PRE-1917



REVOLUTIONARY PETROGRAD, 1917



CIVIL WAR: HEARTLAND, 1919



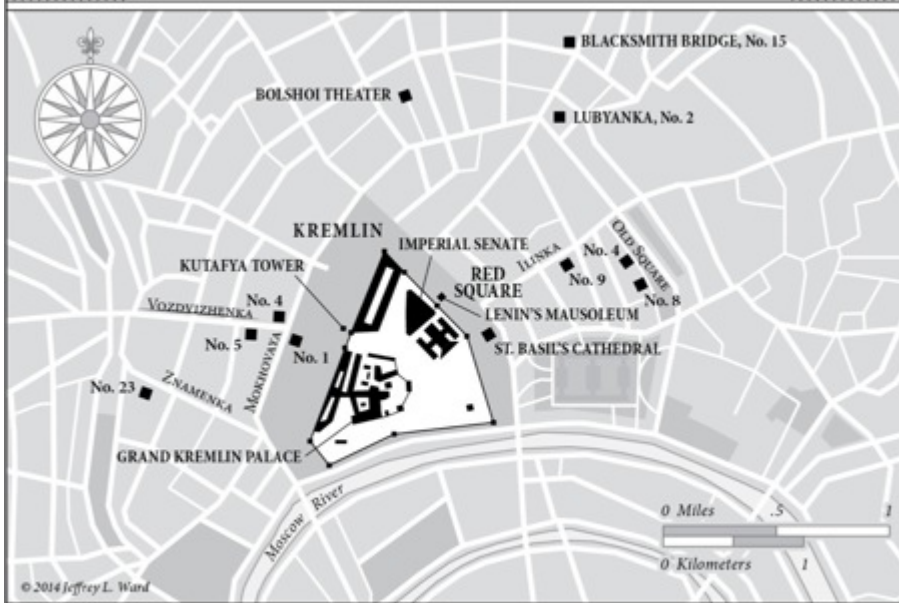
CIVIL WAR: OUTER MONGOLIA, 1921

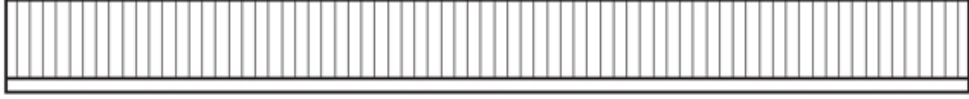


CIVIL WAR: SOVIET-POLISH WAR, 1920



CENTRAL MOSCOW, 1920s





PART 1

DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE

In all his stature he towers over Europe and Asia, over the past and the future. This is the most famous and at the same time the most unknown person in the world.

Henri Barbusse, *Stalin* (1935)

RUSSIA'S DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE NESTED across a greater expanse than that of any other state, before or since. The realm came to encompass not just the palaces of St. Petersburg and the golden domes of Moscow, but Polish and Yiddish-speaking Wilno and Warsaw, the German-founded Baltic ports of Riga and Reval, the Persian and Turkic-language oases of Bukhara and Samarkand (site of Tamerlane's tomb), and the Ainu people of Sakhalin Island near the Pacific Ocean. "Russia" encompassed the cataracts and Cossack settlements of wildly fertile Ukraine and the swamps and trappers of Siberia. It acquired borders on the Arctic and Danube, the Mongolian plateau, and Germany. The Caucasus barrier, too, was breached and folded in, bringing Russia onto the Black and Caspian seas, and giving it borders with Iran and the Ottoman empire. Imperial Russia came to resemble a religious kaleidoscope with a plenitude of Orthodox churches, mosques, synagogues, Old Believer prayer houses, Catholic cathedrals, Armenian Apostolic churches, Buddhist temples, and shaman totems. The empire's vast territory served as a merchant's paradise, epitomized by the slave markets on the steppes and, later, the crossroad fairs in the Volga valley. Whereas the Ottoman empire stretched over parts of three

continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa), some observers in the early twentieth century imagined that the two-continent Russian imperium was neither Europe nor Asia but a third entity unto itself: Eurasia. Be that as it may, what the Venetian ambassador to the Sublime Porte (Agosto Nani) had once said of the Ottoman realm—“more a world than a state”—applied no less to Russia. Upon that world, Stalin’s rule would visit immense upheaval, hope, and grief.

Stalin’s origins, in the Caucasus market and artisan town of Gori, were exceedingly modest—his father was a cobbler, his mother, a washerwoman and seamstress—but in 1894 he entered an Eastern Orthodox theological seminary in Tiflis, the grandest city of the Caucasus, where he studied to become a priest. If in that same year a subject of the Russian empire had fallen asleep and awoken thirty years later, he or she would have been confronted by multiple shocks. By 1924 something called a telephone enabled near instantaneous communication over vast distances. Vehicles moved without horses. Humans flew in the sky. X-rays could see inside people. A new physics had dreamed up invisible electrons inside atoms, as well as the atom’s disintegration in radioactivity, and one theory stipulated that space and time were interrelated and curved. Women, some of whom were scientists, flaunted newfangled haircuts and clothes, called fashions. Novels read like streams of dreamlike consciousness, and many celebrated paintings depicted only shapes and colors.¹ As a result of what was called the Great War (1914–18), the almighty German kaiser had been deposed and Russia’s two big neighboring nemeses, the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, had disappeared. Russia itself was mostly intact, but it was ruled by a person of notably humble origins who also hailed from the imperial borderlands.² To our imaginary thirty-year Rip Van Winkle in 1924, this circumstance—a plebeian and a Georgian having assumed the mantle of the tsars—could well have been the greatest shock of all.

Stalin’s ascension to the top from an imperial periphery was uncommon but not unique. Napoleone di Buonaparte had been born the second of eight children in 1769 on Corsica, a Mediterranean

island annexed only the year before by France; that annexation (from the Republic of Genoa) allowed this young man of modest privilege to attend French military schools. Napoleon (in the French spelling) never lost his Corsican accent, yet he rose to become not only a French general but, by age thirty-five, hereditary emperor of France. The plebeian Adolf Hitler was born entirely outside the country he would dominate: he hailed from the Habsburg borderlands, which had been left out of the 1871 German unification. In 1913, at age twenty-four, he relocated from Austria-Hungary to Munich, just in time, it turned out, to enlist in the imperial German army for the Great War. In 1923, Hitler was convicted of high treason for what came to be known as the Munich Beer Hall Putsch, but a German nationalist judge, ignoring the applicable law, refrained from deporting the non-German citizen. Two years later, Hitler surrendered his Austrian citizenship and became stateless. Only in 1932 did he acquire German citizenship, when he was naturalized on a pretext (nominally, appointed as a “land surveyor” in Braunschweig, a Nazi party electoral stronghold). The next year Hitler was named chancellor of Germany, on his way to becoming dictator. By the standards of a Hitler or a Napoleon, Stalin grew up as an unambiguous subject of his empire, Russia, which had annexed most of Georgia fully seventy-seven years before his birth. Still, his leap from the lowly periphery was improbable.

Stalin’s dictatorial regime presents daunting challenges of explanation. His power of life and death over every single person across eleven time zones—more than 200 million people at prewar peak—far exceeded anything wielded by tsarist Russia’s greatest autocrats. Such power cannot be discovered in the biography of the young Soso Jughashvili. Stalin’s dictatorship, as we shall see, was a product of immense structural forces: the evolution of Russia’s autocratic political system; the Russian empire’s conquest of the Caucasus; the tsarist regime’s recourse to a secret police and entanglement in terrorism; the European castle-in-the-air project of socialism; the underground conspiratorial nature of Bolshevism (a mirror image of repressive tsarism); the failure of the Russian extreme right to coalesce into a fascism despite all the ingredients;

global great-power rivalries, and a shattering world war. Without all of this, Stalin could never have gotten anywhere near power. Added to these large-scale structural factors were contingencies such as the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II during wartime, the conniving miscalculations of Alexander Kerensky (the last head of the Provisional Government that replaced the tsar in 1917), the actions and especially inactions of Bolshevism's many competitors on the left, Lenin's many strokes and his early death in January 1924, and the vanity and ineptitude of Stalin's Bolshevik rivals.

Consider further that the young Jughashvili could have died from smallpox, as did so many of his neighbors, or been carried off by the other fatal diseases that were endemic in the slums of Batum and Baku, where he agitated for socialist revolution. Competent police work could have had him sentenced to forced labor (*katorga*) in a silver mine, where many a revolutionary met an early death. Jughashvili could have been hanged by the authorities in 1906–7 as part of the extrajudicial executions in the crackdown following the 1905 revolution (more than 1,100 were hanged in 1905–6).³ Alternatively, Jughashvili could have been murdered by the innumerable comrades he cuckolded. If Stalin had died in childhood or youth, that would not have stopped a world war, revolution, chaos, and likely some form of authoritarianism redux in post-Romanov Russia. And yet the determination of this young man of humble origins to make something of himself, his cunning, his honing of organizational talents would help transform the entire structural landscape of the early Bolshevik revolution from 1917. Stalin brutally, artfully, indefatigably built a personal dictatorship within the Bolshevik dictatorship. Then he launched and saw through a bloody socialist remaking of the entire former empire, presided over a victory in the greatest war in human history, and took the Soviet Union to the epicenter of global affairs. More than for any other historical figure, even Gandhi or Churchill, a biography of Stalin, as we shall see, eventually comes to approximate a history of the world.

• • •

WORLD HISTORY IS DRIVEN BY GEOPOLITICS. Among the great powers, the British empire, more than any other state, shaped the world in modern times. Between 1688 and 1815, the French fought the British for global supremacy. Despite France's greater land mass and population, Britain emerged the winner, mostly thanks to a superior, lean, fiscal-military state.⁴ By the final defeat of Napoleon, which was achieved in a coalition, the British were the world's dominant power. Their ascendancy, moreover, coincided with China's decline under the Qing dynasty, rendering British power—political, military, industrial, cultural, and fiscal—genuinely global. The felicitous phrase “the sun never sets” that was used to describe the extent of the empire's holdings originated in connection with the earlier empire of Spain, but the saying was applied, and stuck, to the British. In the 1870s, however, two ruptures occurred in the British-dominated world: Prince Otto von Bismarck's unification of Germany, realized on the battlefield by Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, which, in lightning fashion, led to the appearance of a surpassing new power on the European continent; and the Meiji restoration in Japan, which imparted tremendous drive to a new power in East Asia. All of a sudden, imperial Russia faced the world's most dynamic new power on its restive western border, and Asia's most dynamic on its underpopulated eastern border. Russia had entered a new world. This was the world into which Stalin was born.

Even the package of attributes that we call modernity was a result not of some inherent sociological process, a move out of tradition, but of a vicious geopolitical competition in which a state had to match the other great powers in modern steel production, modern militaries, and a modern, mass-based political system, or be crushed and potentially colonized.⁵ These were challenges that confronted conservative establishments especially. Everyone knows that Karl Marx, the radical German journalist and philosopher, loomed over imperial Russia like over no other place. But for most of Stalin's lifetime, it was another German—and a conservative—who loomed over the Russian empire: Otto von Bismarck. A country squire from a Protestant Junker family in eastern Brandenburg who had attended

the University of Gottingen, joined a *Burschenschaften* (fraternity), and was known as a solid drinker and devotee of the female of the species, Bismarck had held no administrative posts as late as 1862, although he had been ambassador to Russia and to France. But in fewer than ten years, he had risen to become the Iron Chancellor and, using Prussia as his base, forged a mighty new country. Prussia, the proverbial “army in search of a nation,” had found one. At the same time, the rightist German chancellor showed rulers everywhere how to uphold modern state power by cultivating a broader political base, developing heavy industry, introducing social welfare, and juggling alliances with and against an array of other ambitious great powers.

Bismarck the statesman was one for the ages. He craftily upended his legions of opponents, both outside and inside the German principalities, and instigated three swift, decisive, yet limited wars to crush Denmark, then Austria, then France, but he kept the state of Austria-Hungary on the Danube for the sake of the balance of power. He created pretexts to attack when in a commanding position or baited the other countries into launching the wars after he had isolated them diplomatically. He made sure to have alternatives, and played these alternatives off against each other. That said, Bismarck had had no master plan for German unity—his enterprise was an improvisation, driven partly by domestic political considerations (to tame the liberals in Prussia’s parliament). But he had constantly worked circumstances and luck to supreme advantage, breaking through structural limitations, creating new realities on the ground. “Politics is less a science than an art,” Bismarck would say. “It is not a subject that can be taught. One must have the talent for it. Even the best advice is of no avail if improperly carried out.”⁶ He further spoke of politics in terms of cards, dice, and other games of chance. “One can be as shrewd as the shrewdest in this world and still at any moment go like a child into the dark,” Bismarck had remarked on the victory in the war he instigated in 1864 against Denmark.⁷ This he complained was “a thankless job. . . . One has to reckon with a series of probabilities and

improbabilities and base one's plans upon this reckoning." Bismarck did not invoke virtue, but only power and interests. Later this style of rule would become known as *realpolitik*, a term coined by August von Rochau (1810-73), a German National Liberal disappointed in the failure to break through to a constitution in 1848. In its origins, *realpolitik* signified effective practical politics to realize idealistic aims. Bismarck's style was more akin to the term *raison d'état*: calculating, amoral reason of state. Instead of principles, there were objectives; instead of morality, means.⁸ Bismarck was widely hated until he proved brilliantly successful, then lionized beyond reason for having smashed France, made a vassal out of Austria, and united Germany.

Bismarck went on to form the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy (1882) and sign a secret "reinsurance treaty" with Russia (1888), extracting neutrality in the event of a conflict, thereby obviating a possible two-front war against France and Russia and accentuating the new Germany's mastery of the continent. His gifts were those of the inner sanctum. He did not possess a strong voice or self-confidence in speaking, and did not spend much time amid the public. Moreover, he was not the ruler: he served at the pleasure of the king (and then kaiser), Wilhelm I. In that all-important relationship, Bismarck showed psychological skill and tenacity, ceaselessly, efficaciously manipulating Wilhelm I, threatening his resignation, pulling all manner of histrionics. Wilhelm I, for his part, proved to be a diligent, considerate, and intelligent monarch, with the smarts to defer to Bismarck on policy and to attend to the myriad feathers his Iron Chancellor ruffled.⁹ Bismarck strategized to make himself indispensable partly by making everything as complex as possible, so that he alone knew how things worked (this became known as his combinations). He had so many balls up in the air at all times that he could never stop scrambling to prevent any from dropping, even as he was tossing up still more. It must also be kept in mind that Bismarck enjoyed the benefit of the world's then-best land army (and perhaps second-best navy).

Other would-be statesmen across Europe went to school with Bismarck's example of "politics as art."¹⁰ To be sure, from the perspective of London, which had well-established rule of law, Bismarck appeared as a menace. But from the perspective of St. Petersburg, where the challenges were finding a bulwark against leftist extremism, he looked like salvation. From any vantage point, his aggrandizement of Prussia via a German unification—without the support of a mass movement, with no significant previous experience of government, and against an array of formidable interests—ranks among the greatest diplomatic achievements by any leader in the last two centuries.¹¹ Moreover, paying indirect homage to a ruler he had vanquished, France's Napoleon III, Bismarck introduced universal manhood suffrage, banking conservatives' political fortunes on the peasants' German nationalism to afford dominance of parliament. "If Mephistopheles climbed up the pulpit and read the Gospel, could anyone be inspired by this prayer?" huffed a newspaper of Germany's outflanked liberals. What is more, Bismarck goaded Germany's conservatives to agree to broad social welfare legislation, outflanking the socialists, too. What made Bismarck's unification feat still more momentous was the added circumstance that the newly unified Germany soon underwent a phenomenal economic surge. Seemingly overnight the country vaulted past the world's number one power, Great Britain, in key modern industries such as steel and chemicals. As Britain became consumed with its (relative) "decline," the new Bismarckian Reich pushed to realign the world order. Germany was "like a great boiler," one Russian observed, "developing surplus steam at extreme speed, for which an outlet is required."¹² As we shall see, Russia's establishment—or, at least, its more able elements—became obsessed with Bismarck. Not one but two Germans, Bismarck and Marx, constituted imperial Russia's other double-headed eagle.

• • •

STALIN SEEMS WELL KNOWN TO US. An older image—that his father beat him; the Orthodox seminary oppressed him; he developed a “Lenin complex” to surpass his mentor, then studied up on Ivan the Terrible, all of which led to the slaughter of millions—has long been unconvincing, even in its sophisticated versions that combine analyses of Russian political culture and personality.¹³ Humiliation does often serve as the wellspring of savagery, but it is not clear that Stalin suffered the predominantly traumatic childhood usually attributed to him. Despite a malformed body and many illnesses, he exhibited a vigorous intellect, a thirst for self-improvement, and a knack for leadership. True, he had a mischievous streak. “Little Soso was very naughty,” recalled his companion Grigory Elisabedashvili. “He loved his catapult and homemade bow. Once, a herdsman was bringing his animals home when Soso jumped out and catapulted one in the head. The ox went crazy, the herd stampeded and the herdsman chased Soso, who disappeared.”¹⁴ But cousins who knew the young Stalin were able to keep in touch until his death.¹⁵ Many of his schoolteachers also survived to compose memoirs.¹⁶ Moreover, even if his childhood had been entirely miserable, as many have one-sidedly portrayed it, such a circumstance would explain little of the later Stalin. Nor can we find much help in Lev Trotsky’s dismissal of Stalin as a mere product of the bureaucracy, a “*komitetchik* (committeeman) par excellence”—that is, a supposedly lesser being than either a real proletarian or a real intellectual (aka Trotsky).¹⁷ Stalin’s father and mother were both born serfs and they never got any formal education, but he emerged from a family of strivers, including his much maligned father. And Stalin’s hometown, Gori, usually derided as a backwater, afforded an important measure of educational opportunity.

A newer image of the young Stalin, calling upon a wide array of recently available source materials (including reminiscences solicited and shaped in the 1930s by Lavrenti Beria), has recaptured the capable student and the talent. These memoirs, though, have also been used to depict an implausibly swashbuckling figure, a ladies’ man and macho bandit of the colorful Orientalist variety.¹⁸ This

makes for gripping reading. It also contains several valuable revelations. Still, the new image, too, falls short of being persuasive. The young Stalin had a penis, and he used it. But Stalin was not some special Lothario. Both Marx and Engels fathered illegitimate children—Marx by his housekeeper, a paternity Engels protectively claimed—yet, obviously, that is not the reason Marx entered history.¹⁹ A young Saddam Hussein wrote poetry, too, but the Iraqi was a bona fide assassin decades before becoming dictator in Baghdad. The young Stalin was a poet but no assassin. Nor was he some kind of Mafia don of the Caucasus, however much Beria might have thought such an image flattering of Stalin.²⁰ The young Stalin did attract small groups of followers at different times, but nothing permanent. Indeed, the overriding fact of Stalin's underground revolutionary activity is that he never consolidated a political base in the Caucasus. Stalin did not bring with him to the capital the equivalent of Saddam Hussein's "Tikriti network."²¹ Examined soberly, the young Stalin had decidedly mixed success in mounting illegal printing presses, fomenting strikes, and plotting financial expropriations. His behind-the-scenes role in a spectacular 1907 daylight robbery in Tiflis—a fact established by Miklós Kun and beautifully rendered by Simon Sebag Montefiore—does show that the young Stalin would do just about anything for the cause.²² But the robbery was not an end in itself. There *was* a cause: socialism and social justice, alongside the project of his own advancement. Nothing—not the teenage girls, the violence, the camaraderie—diverted him from what became his life mission.

This book will avoid speculative leaps or what is known as filling in the gaps in the record of Stalin's life.²³ It will seek to navigate with care among the vivid yet dubious stories. The future Stalin's past of underground revolutionary activities in the Caucasus is bedeviled by regime lies, rivals' slander, and missing documents.²⁴ Still, we can say for sure that the assertions he was *especially* treacherous in betraying comrades are comical in the context of what went on in Social Democrat ranks. Stalin was imperious (as imperious as Lenin and Trotsky) and prickly (as prickly as Lenin and Trotsky). He

remembered perceived slights, something of a cliché in the blood-feud Caucasus culture but also common among narcissists (another word for many a professional revolutionary). True, more than most, the young Stalin perpetually antagonized colleagues by asserting claims to leadership whatever his formal assignments and achievements; then, invariably, he viewed himself as the wronged party. Stalin was often gregarious but also moody and aloof, which made him seem suspicious. And he generally gravitated toward people like himself: parvenu intelligentsia of humble background. (He “surrounded himself exclusively with people who respected him unconditionally and gave in to him on every issue,” one foe later wrote.)²⁵ The wild revolutionary years of 1905–8 notwithstanding, the young Stalin was really mostly a pundit for small-print-run publications. But they were illegal and he was constantly on the run, tailed by the police as he scurried between Tiflis, Batum, Chiatura, Baku, and elsewhere in the Caucasus; Tammerfors (Russian Finland), London, Stockholm, Berlin, Vienna, and elsewhere in Europe; Vologda in European Russia’s north and Turukhansk in Eastern Siberia.²⁶ Though the future Stalin was unusual in never seeking to emigrate, his early life—which between 1901 and 1917 included a total of some seven years in Siberian exile and prison, as well as short stints abroad—was more or less typical for the revolutionary underground. Especially from 1908 onward, he lived a life of penury, begging everyone for money, nursing resentments, and spending most of his time, like other prisoners and exiles, bored out of his mind.

The man who would become Stalin was a product of both the Russian imperial garrisons in Georgia, for which his father moved to Gori to make shoes, and the imperial administrators and churchmen, whose Russification measures gave him an education, but also, unwittingly, amplified the late-nineteenth-century Georgian national awakening that greatly affected him, too.²⁷ Later, Stalin’s young son would confide in his older sister that their father, in his youth, had been a Georgian—and it was true. “Be full of blossom, Oh lovely land, Rejoice, Iverians’ country, And you, Oh Georgian, by studying

Bring joy to your motherland,” a seventeen-year-old Jughashvili wrote in one of his precocious Georgian romantic poems (“Morning”).²⁸ He published only in the Georgian language for the first twenty-nine years of his life. “He spoke exceptionally pure Georgian,” recalled someone who met him in 1900. “His diction was clear, and his conversation betrayed a lively sense of humor.”²⁹ To be sure, Stalin proved to be something of a bad Georgian, at least by stereotype: not honorable to a fault, not uncompromisingly loyal to friends and family, not mindful of old debts.³⁰ At the same time, Georgia was a diverse land and the future Stalin picked up colloquial Armenian. He also dabbled in Esperanto (the constructed internationalist language), studied but never mastered German (the native tongue of the left), and tackled Plato in Greek. Above all, he became fluent in the imperial language: Russian. The result was a young man who delighted in the aphorisms of the Georgian national poet Shota Rustaveli (“A close friend turned out to be an enemy more dangerous than a foe”)³¹ but also in the ineffable, melancholy works of Anton Chekhov, whose *Cherry Orchard* (1903) depicted a speculator’s axes chopping down a minor nobleman’s trees (the estate and mansion had been sold off to a vulgar bourgeois). Stalin immersed himself in both imperial Russian and Georgian history, too.

What differentiated the young Stalin in the Russian Bolshevik revolutionary milieu beyond his Georgian origins was his tremendous dedication to self-improvement. He devoured books, which, as a Marxist, he did so in order to change the world. Perhaps nothing stands out more than his intense political sectarianism (even in a culture where up to one third of the religiously Eastern Orthodox were schismatics). His youthful years involved becoming a Marxist of Leninist persuasion and battling not just tsarism but the factions of other revolutionaries.³² Ultimately, though, the most important factor in shaping Stalin and his later rule, as we shall examine in detail, entailed something he encountered only partly as a youth: namely, the inner workings, imperatives, and failures of the imperial Russian state and autocracy. The immensity of that history reduces Stalin’s

early life to proper perspective. But it also sets the stage for grasping the immensity of his subsequent impact.