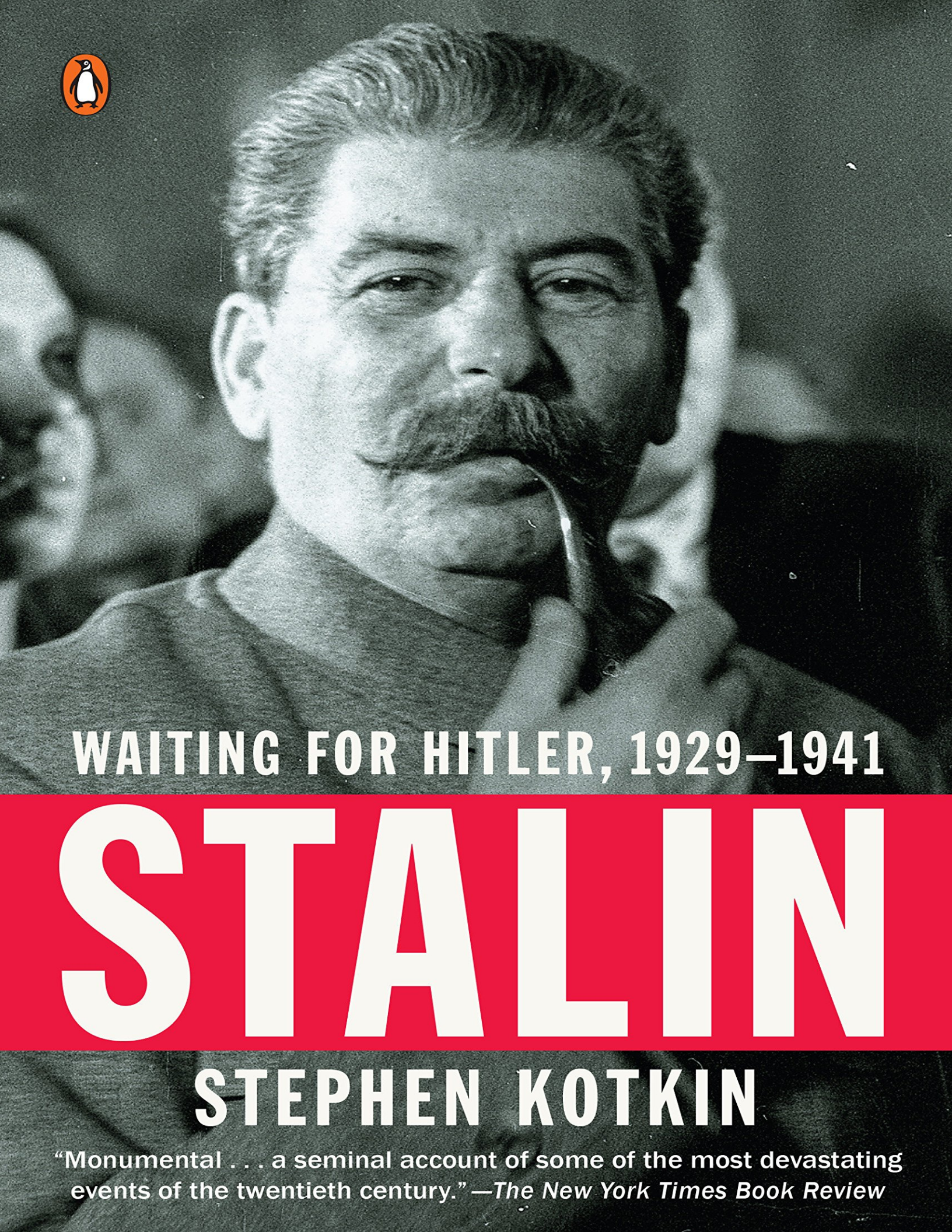

WAITING FOR HITLER, 1929–1941

STALIN

STEPHEN KOTKIN

"Monumental . . . a seminal account of some of the most devastating events of the twentieth century." —*The New York Times Book Review*

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STALIN

WAITING FOR HITLER

1929–1941

STEPHEN KOTKIN

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Maps by Jeffrey L. Ward

Version_1

for Alex Levine and Joyce Howe
who, beginning with the rough patches in graduate school, held me together

Midway on life's journey
I found myself in a dark wood,
for the straight path was lost.

DANTE ALIGHIERI,
The Divine Comedy, 1308–1321

It cannot be called virtue to kill one's fellow citizens, betray one's friends, be without faith, without pity, without religion; by these methods one may indeed gain power, but not glory.

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI,
The Prince, 1513

CONTENTS

PREFACE

But if there isn't a tsar, who's going to rule Russia?

ALEXEI, 1917, *when his father, Nicholas II, abdicated for both of them*

THROUGH THE FIRST THIRTY-NINE YEARS OF HIS LIFE, the achievements of Iosif Stalin (b. 1878) were meager. As a teenager, he had abandoned a successful trajectory, with high marks in school, to fight tsarist oppression, and published first-rate poems in a Georgian newspaper, which he recited in front of others. ("To this day his beautiful, sonorous lyrics echo in my ears," one person would recall.) But his profession—revolutionary—made for a "career" of hiding, prison, exile, escape, recapture, penury. It had gotten to the point, in far northern Siberia, that even escape had become impossible. He persevered, known only to the tsarist police and some of his fellow revolutionaries, who were dispersed in remote internal exile, like him, or in Europe. Only the world-shattering Great War, the shocking abdication of the tsar and tsarevich in February 1917, the return of Vladimir Lenin to Russia that April thanks to imperial German cynicism, the suicidal Russia-initiated military offensive in June, and a fatal pas de deux between Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky and Supreme Commander Lavr Kornilov in August had altered Stalin's life prospects. All of a sudden, he had become one of the four leading figures in an improbable Bolshevik regime. He played an outsized role in the 1918–21 civil war and territorial reconquest, and a foremost role in the invention of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In 1922, five years removed from desolate isolation near the Arctic Circle, he found himself in the uncanny position of being able to build a personal dictatorship within the Bolshevik dictatorship, thanks to Lenin's appointing him Communist party general secretary (April), followed by Lenin's incapacitating stroke (May). Stalin seized that opportunity passionately and ruthlessly. By 1928, he had decided that 120 million peasants in Soviet Eurasia had to be forcibly collectivized. The years 1917–28 proved to be astonishingly eventful. But the years from 1929 through 1941—the period covered in this volume—would prove still more so.

This volume, too, examines Stalin's power in Russia, recast as the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union's power in the world. But whereas in the preceding volume he was offstage for long stretches as global developments unfolded around him, now the opposite and, in fact, more difficult challenge of narration awaits: Stalin is present on nearly every page. He is now deep into the violent reshaping of all Eurasia that he announced at the end of volume I, continuing to micromanage the

ever-expanding party-state machinery, delving into the granular details of armaments production and grain collections, while also conducting a comprehensive foreign policy touching all corners of the planet and, for the first time, overseeing cultural affairs. But volume II takes place largely in his office, and, indeed, in his mind. Whereas right through 1927, he had not appeared to be a sociopath in the eyes of those who worked most closely with him, by 1929–30 he was exhibiting an intense dark side. As the decade progresses, he will go from learning to be a dictator to becoming impatient with dictatorship and forging a despotism in mass bloodshed. Volume I's analytical burden of explaining where such power comes from remains, but volume II raises questions of why he arrested and murdered immense numbers of loyal people in his own commissariats, officer corps, secret police, embassies, spy networks, scientific and artistic circles, and party organizations. What could he have been thinking? How was this even possible?

Stalin's mass terror of 1936–38 was a central episode, but not *the* central episode, of his regime in the period covered by this volume. That designation belongs, first, to the 1929–33 collectivization of agriculture, then to the 1939 Pact with Nazi Germany and its aftershocks. If Stalin's foil in volume I was Trotsky (who, though politically vanquished, will haunt him more than ever), now a second materializes, and not a foreign exile wielding little more than a pen, but another dictator presiding over the rearmament of the greatest power on the continent.

Adolf Hitler was eleven years Stalin's junior, born in 1889 in a frontier region of Austria-Hungary. He lost his father at age fifteen and his mother at eighteen. (The Jewish physician who tended to his mother would recall that in forty years he had never seen anyone as broken with grief over a mother's death as her son.) At age twenty, Hitler found himself on a breadline in Vienna, his inheritance and savings nearly spent. He had twice been rejected from Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts ("sample drawing unsatisfactory") and was staying in a homeless shelter behind a railway station. A vagrant on the next bed recalled that Hitler's "clothes were being cleaned of lice, since for days he had been wandering about without a roof and in a terribly neglected condition." The vagrant added that Hitler lived on various shelters' bread and soup and "discussed politics." With a small loan from an aunt, he got himself into better quarters, a men's home, and managed to find odd jobs, such as painting picture postcards and drafting advertisements. He also frequented the city's public libraries, where he read political tracts, newspapers, the philosopher Schopenhauer, and the fiction of Karl May set in the cowboys-and-Indians days of the American West or the exotic Near East. Hitler dodged the Austrian draft and the police. When they finally caught up with him, they judged the undernourished and gloomy youth to be unfit for service. He fled across the border to Munich, and in August 1914 he joined the German army as a private. He ended the Great War still a private, but its aftermath transformed his life prospects. He would be among the many who migrated from left to right in the chaotic wake of imperial Germany's defeat.

During the November 1918 leftist revolution in Munich, Hitler was in a hospital in Pomerania, but he was released and marched in the funeral cortège of provincial

Bavaria's murdered leader, a Jewish Social Democrat; film footage captured Hitler wearing two armbands, one black (for mourning) and the other red. After Social Democrats and anarchists, in April 1919, formed a Bavarian Soviet Republic, the Communists quickly seized power; Hitler, who contemplated joining the Social Democrats, served as a delegate from his battalion's soviet (council). He had no profession to speak of, but appears to have taken part in leftist indoctrination of the troops. Ten days before Hitler's thirtieth birthday, the Bavarian Soviet was quickly crushed by the so-called Freikorps of war veterans. He remained in the military because a superior, the chief of the German army's "information" department, had the idea of sending him to an antileftist instructional course, then using him to infiltrate leftist groups. The officer recalled that Hitler "was like a tired stray dog looking for a master," and "ready to throw in his lot with anyone who would show him kindness." Be that as it may, the assignment as informant led to Hitler's involvement in a minuscule right-wing group, the German Workers' Party, which had been established to draw workers away from Communism and which Hitler, with the assistance of rabidly anti-Semitic émigrés from the former imperial Russia, would remake into the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or Nazis.

Now a transfixing far-right agitator, Hitler remained a marginal figure. When Stalin was the new general secretary of the Communist party of the largest state in the world, Hitler was in prison for a failed attempt, in 1923 in Munich, his adopted hometown, to seize power locally, which would be derided as the Beer Hall Putsch. To be sure, he had managed to turn his trial into a triumph. (One of the judges remarked, "What a tremendous chap, this Hitler!") Indeed, even though Hitler was an Austrian citizen and convicted, the presiding judge had refrained from having him deported, reasoning that the law "cannot apply to a man who thinks and feels as German as Hitler, who voluntarily served for four and a half years in the German army at war, who attained high military honors through outstanding bravery in the face of the enemy, was wounded." During his first two weeks in prison, Hitler refused to eat, believing he deserved to die, but letters arrived congratulating him as a national hero. Richard Wagner's daughter-in-law Winifred sent paper and pencil, encouraging him to write a book. Hitler had an attendant in confinement, Rudolf Hess, who typed his dictation, creating an autobiography dedicated to the sixteen Nazis killed in the failed putsch. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler portrayed himself as a man of destiny and pledged to revive Germany as a great power and rid it of Jews, anointing himself "the destroyer of Marxism." In December 1924, after serving thirteen months of a five-year sentence, he was released, but his book sales disappointed, a second book failed to find a publisher, and his Nazi party proved ineffectual at the ballot box. Lord d'Abernon, the British ambassador to Berlin at the time, summarized Hitler's political life after his early release from prison as "thereafter fading into oblivion."

History is full of surprises. That this Austrian in a fringe political movement would become the dictator of Germany, and Stalin's principal nemesis, was scarcely imaginable. But Field Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke the Elder (1800–91), chief of the Prussian and then German general staff for thirty-one

years, had conceived of strategy as improvisation, a "system of expedients," an ability to turn unexpected developments created by others or by happenstance to one's advantage, and Hitler turned out to be just such a master improviser: often uncertain, a perpetrator of mistakes and a beneficiary of luck, but a man possessed of radical ideas who sensed where he was ultimately going and grasped opportunities that came his way. Stalin, too, was a strategist in von Moltke's sense, a man of radical ideas able to perceive and seize opportunities that he did not always create but turned to his advantage. The richest opportunities perceived by Stalin and Hitler were often supposedly urgent "threats" they inflated or invented. If history is driven by geopolitics, institutions, and ideas, especially that triad's interaction, it takes historical agents to set it all in motion.

No country had seemed capable of surpassing Great Britain, whose overseas empire would soon encompass a quarter of the globe, and whose power obsessed both Stalin and Hitler as the prime mover of the entire world. But Stalin had also grown up in an epoch when Germany had begun to stand out for having the best manufacturing processes and engineering schools. His direct experience of Germany consisted of just a few months in 1907 in Berlin, where he stopped on the way back to Russia from a Bolshevik meeting in London. He studied but never mastered the German language. But like several tsarist predecessors, especially Sergei Witte, Stalin was a Germanophile, admiring that country's industry and science—in a word, its modernity. For the longest time, though, Stalin had no idea of Hitler's existence.

Tsarist Russia had aimed in the Great War to destroy forever the threat of German power by breaking up the Hohenzollern and Habsburg realms and establishing a belt of Slavic states that would presumably be friendly to Russia. German and Austrian war aims, conversely, had sought to diminish a perceived Russian menace by stripping it of its western borderlands. If Russia had won the war, it would likely have enacted something like the German-imposed Brest-Litovsk Treaty in reverse. But Russia lost (on the eastern front), just as Germany and Austria-Hungary lost (on the western front), leading to the Versailles Peace. Contrary to received wisdom, Europe's postwar security system did not disintegrate because of spinelessness or blundering. Only the dual collapse of Russian and German power had made possible Versailles, which could have succeeded only if German and Russian power never rose again. (Britain effectively recognized the instability of Versailles, for, having failed to reach a modus vivendi with German power before the Great War clash, would spend the entire postwar period pursuing an accommodation.) The two Versailles pariahs, Germany and the Soviet Union, entered into clandestine military cooperation. Then, in 1933, as we shall see, Hitler was handed the wheel of the great state Stalin admired. The lives of the two dictators, as the biographer Alan Bullock wrote, had run in parallel. But it was the intersection that would matter: two very different men from the peripheries of Russian power and of German power, respectively, who were bloodily reviving and remaking their countries, while unknowingly and then knowingly drawing ever closer. It was not only the German people who turned out to be waiting for Hitler.

A BRIEF NOTE ON SOURCES

This is a book about authoritarian rule, coercion, manipulation of social divisions and invention of enemies, institutionalized prevarication, but it is based on research into facts. Stalin left an immense historical record. His surviving personal archive ("fond" or collection 558) exists in two parts, now brought together. The first ten sections (identified in Russian by "opis" or finding aid) consist of materials systematized from his own and other archives in connection with a biography planned for his sixtieth birthday in 1939 by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute (now called RGASPI). These include his personal photo albums, correspondence, and reminiscences about him. Books from his personal library (opis 4) would be added after his death. The more valuable second part consists of one vast section (opis 11), which was his working personal archive, located in the "special sector" of the apparatus, later called the Politburo (now the Presidential) Archive, but transferred to RGASPI in 1998–99. Stalin decided what would go into this working archive, but these materials do not always show him in the best light; on the contrary, many documents he kept demonstrate his policy mistakes and his gratuitous cruelty to his opponents and loyalists (who, despite their own crimes, sometimes emerge worthy of sympathy). Some of Stalin's personal archive—how much remains impossible to say—was destroyed by him and others. For example, he was known to make notes in two sets of notebooks, one black (for technology) and one red (for personnel), but none of these have turned up, save for a few pages. Files of compromising materials on the members of his inner circle, believed to have been in his Kremlin office safe or a cupboard at his Near Dacha, have not turned up. The invaluable logbooks for visitors to his two offices (Old Square and the Kremlin) have been published, but the ones for his Moscow dacha have not and are feared to have been lost or pulped. His enormous record collection vanished, and the bulk of his library was dispersed. Nonetheless, the amount of materials that has survived and become accessible is staggering.

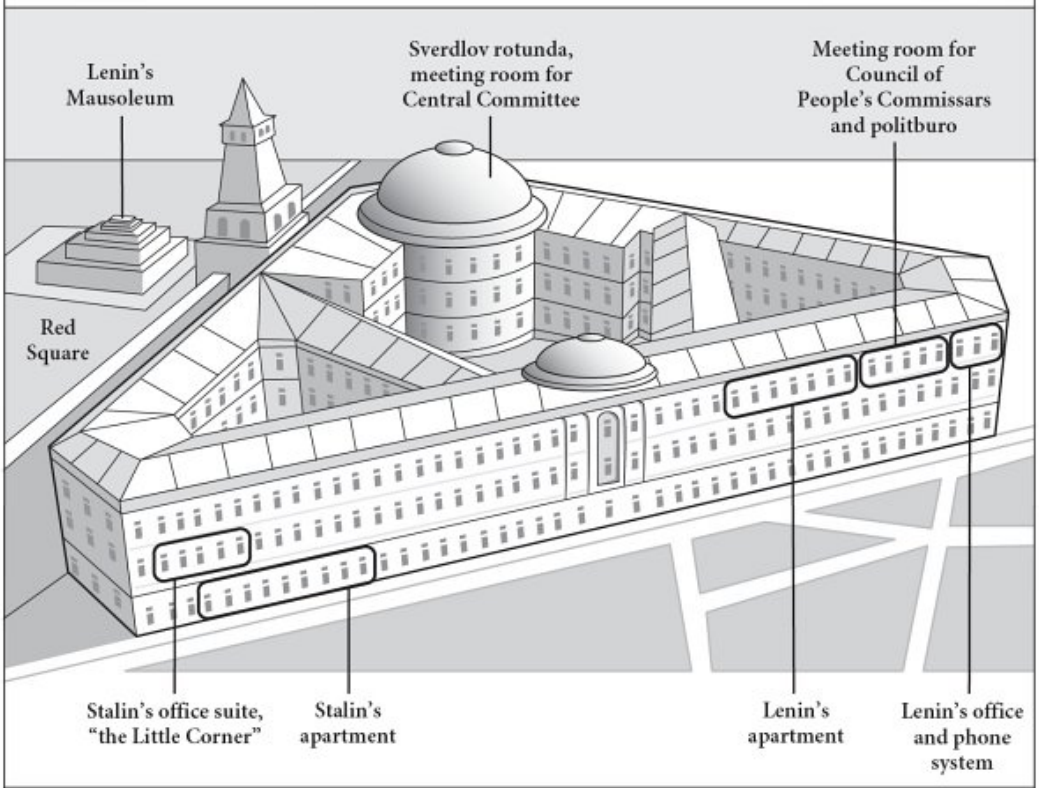
Not only do we have Stalin's personal archive, but also colossal party and state archives, in the capital and in regions, while for foreign affairs there are the archives of other governments, too. Even though in Stalin's case we lack a *Mein Kampf*, recorded "table talks," or bona fide accounts by mistresses, we do have his voluminous correspondence while on holiday in Sochi or Gagra, when he issued detailed instructions to those running affairs on his behalf back in the capital. In addition, many other minions recorded his instructions—the boss of the film industry, the head of the Comintern, the notetaker for the government—in real time. Subsequent memoirs, some of which are revealing, enhance and sometimes unlock the archival materials. Regime transcripts for instructional dissemination were made of all party congresses, most of Stalin's extended remarks at Kremlin receptions, and a handful of key politburo and Central Committee meetings. The central press, which he tightly controlled, also affords excellent material on his thinking. Archives of the secret police, counterintelligence, and bodyguard directorate remain almost entirely closed, and those for the military and foreign policy arm can be very difficult to access, but these institutions have published

enormous quantities of document collections, and those scholars who have enjoyed unusually good access, including to the secret police materials, have published monographs with extensive quotations. There is also the phenomenon of scanning, which permits the quiet sharing of documents. So the evidentiary record, while not complete, is astonishingly rich.

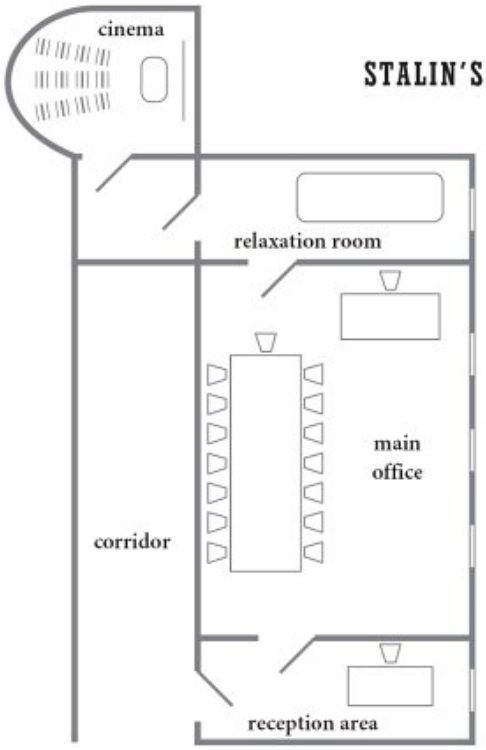
Many scholars have been working on these materials, and this volume is indebted to the excellent research produced by R. W. Davies on the economy, Oleg Khlevniuk on the party-state machinery, Vladimir Khaustov on the secret police, Matthew Lenoe on events surrounding Sergei Kirov, Vladimir Nevezhin on the conception of the Soviet state as a great power, Adam Tooze on Nazi Germany's grand strategy, Gabriel Gorodetsky on the British establishment and on Stalin's foreign policy, and countless others, acknowledged in the endnotes.

Words cannot express how much better this book became thanks to my U.S.-based editor, Scott Moyers, and the rest of the team at Penguin. It exists at all thanks to him and my agent, Andrew Wylie. Many others—alas, far too numerous to list—deserve to be singled out for their kindness and perspicacity. Let me here express my gratitude to all, particularly archivists, librarians, and fellow scholars in Russia. Oleg Budnitskii took me on as an associate senior researcher at his International Center for the History and Sociology of World War II and Its Consequences at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, in Moscow. I have also benefited tremendously from being a fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, whose Library and Archives are a treasure beyond belief, and I am deeply grateful to the L&A director, Eric Wakin. Above all, Princeton University has provided me a dream scholarly home and spectacular students for the better part of three decades.

THE IMPERIAL SENATE (MOSCOW KREMLIN)

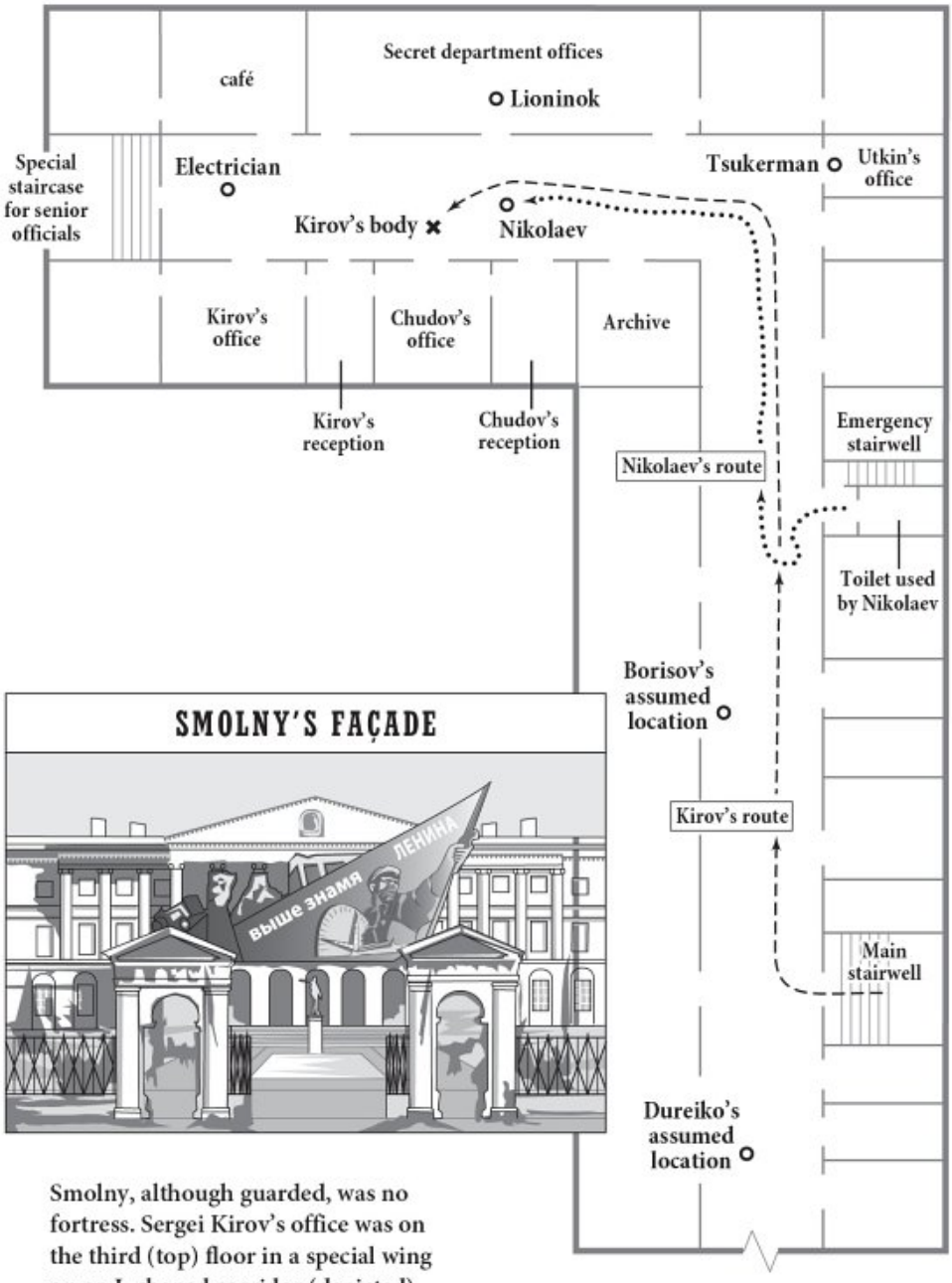


STALIN'S "LITTLE CORNER"



The Imperial Senate was a fortress within a fortress. Stalin's expansive wing, the "special sector," had its own entrance and a special door separating it from the offices of the Council of People's Commissars. His office suite, around 1600 square feet, had a concealed escape shaft with a ladder leading to the basement.

SMOLNY (LENINGRAD)



SMOLNY'S FAÇADE

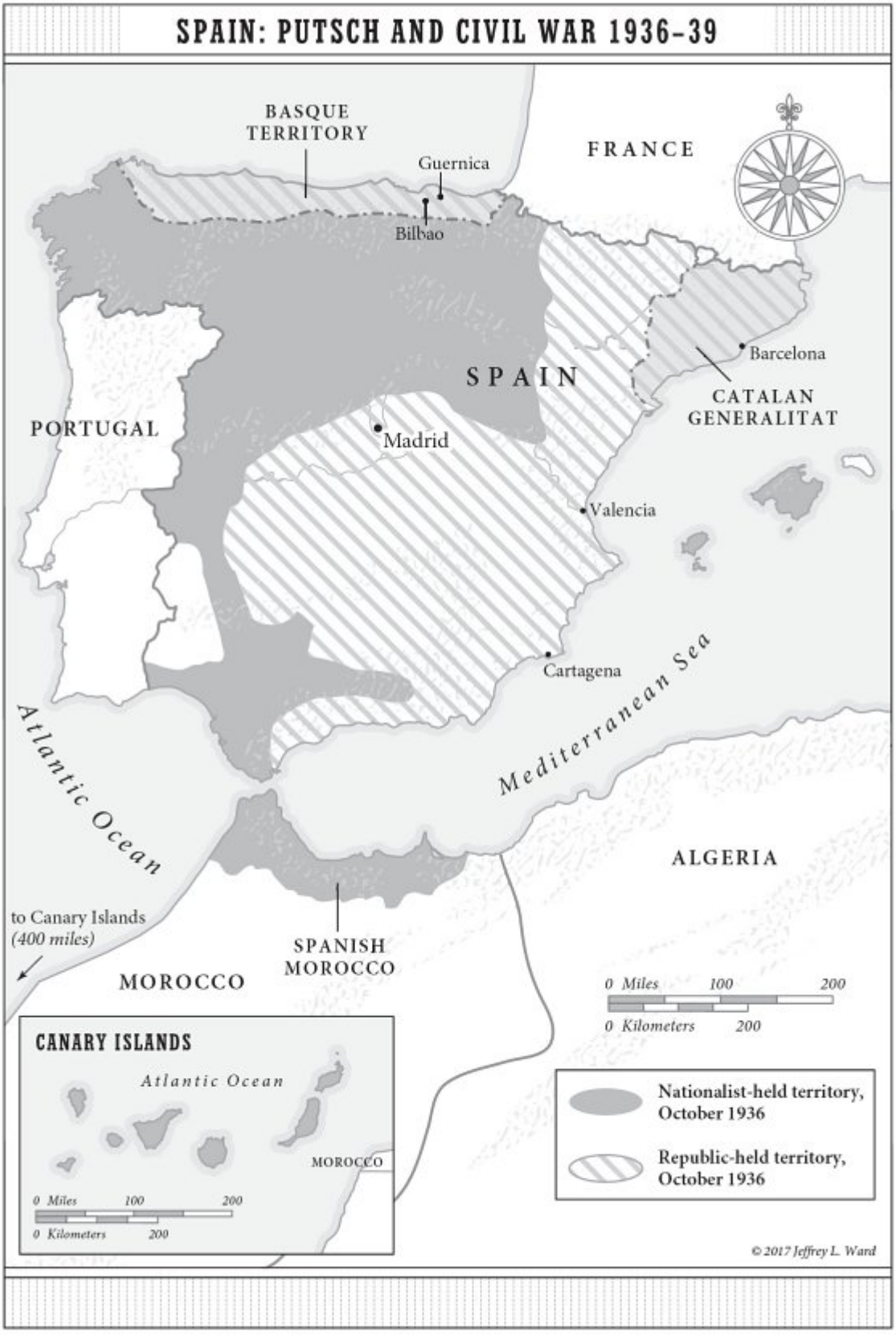
Smolny, although guarded, was no fortress. Sergei Kirov's office was on the third (top) floor in a special wing on an L-shaped corridor (depicted).

Adapted from Alla Kirilina and Matthew Lenoe


SOVIET FAMINE 1931–34
This map offers a preliminary overview of the extent and severity of the famine. Soviet census and mortality/morbidity data can be uncertain because millions were on the move during this period. (The largest decline in population between the 1926 and 1937 censuses occurred in Saratov province, but this was not the place where the famine proved most severe.) Little information is available for some regions (Chuvash autonomous province, Northern province, Eastern Siberia). The famine did not begin and end at the same time in all places. The map offers estimated degrees of certainty based on what has been substantiated to date. (Courtesy of Mark Tauger)
Arctic Ocean
Pacific Ocean
Baltic Sea
Black Sea
Caspian Sea
SOVIET UKRAINE
CENTRAL BLACK EARTH
ARKHANGELSK PROVINCE
TATAR AUTONOMOUS REPUBLIC
URALS
LITTLE DATA
RUSSIAN REPUBLIC
LOWER VOLGA
MID-VOLGA
NORTH CAUCASUS
SOVIET GEORGIA
KAZAKH AUTONOMOUS REPUBLIC
CHINA
JAPAN
MONGOLIA
CHINA
EXTENT AND SEVERITY OF FAMINE AND ITS EFFECTS, 1931–34
Based on a Map of Administrative Divisions of the USSR in 1931
Most extreme mortality and disruption
High degree
Next degree down
Urban food shortages (applies to all regions)


JAPAN: EMPIRE AND AMBITIONS
USSR
MANCHUKUO (1932)
SOUTHERN SAKAHLIN (1905)
OUTER MONGOLIA
Halha River, 1939
Lake Kasan (Changkufeng), 1938
KURILES (1875)
Vladivostok
Sea of Japan
MENGJIANG (1939)
Peking
KOREA (1910)
JAPAN
Yellow Sea
Tokyo
Pacific Ocean
Shanghai
CHINA
East China Sea
0 Miles 1000
0 Kilometers 1000
BURMA
Hong Kong
TAIWAN (1895)
South China Sea
PHILIPPINES
THAILAND
FRENCH INDO-CHINA
Japanese territorial conquests and dates of incorporation
© 2017 Jeffrey L. Ward


CHINA: FOREIGN OCCUPATION AND CIVIL WAR
USSR
MANCHURIA/
Manchukuo
OUTER MONGOLIA
(Soviet puppet state)
CHINESE EASTERN
RAILROAD
Harbin
SOUTH MANCHURIAN
RAILROAD
Vladivostok
Kuriles
Mukden
XINJIANG
(de facto Soviet
protectorate)
Marco Polo
Bridge (1937)
Sea of
Japan
JAPAN
Yan'an (Shaanxi province)
Yellow
Sea
Tokyo
Route of
the Long March
(1934–35)
Xi'an
Nanking
Pacific
Ocean
CHINA
Wuhan
Shanghai
Chongqing
East
China
Sea
Taiwan
Hong Kong
BURMA
0 Miles
1000
0 Kilometers
1000
South
China
Sea
THAILAND
FRENCH
INDO-CHINA
PHILIPPINES
Areas occupied by the Japanese
© 2017 Jeffrey L. Ward


SPAIN: PUTSCH AND CIVIL WAR 1936–39
BASQUE TERRITORY
Guernica
Bilbao
FRANCE
Barcelona
CATALAN GENERALITAT
SPAIN
PORTUGAL
Madrid
Valencia
Cartagena
Mediterranean Sea
Atlantic Ocean
ALGERIA
to Canary Islands (400 miles)
SPANISH MOROCCO
MOROCCO
0 Miles 100 200
0 Kilometers 200
CANARY ISLANDS
Atlantic Ocean
MOROCCO
0 Miles 100 200
0 Kilometers 200
Nationalist-held territory, October 1936
Republic-held territory, October 1936
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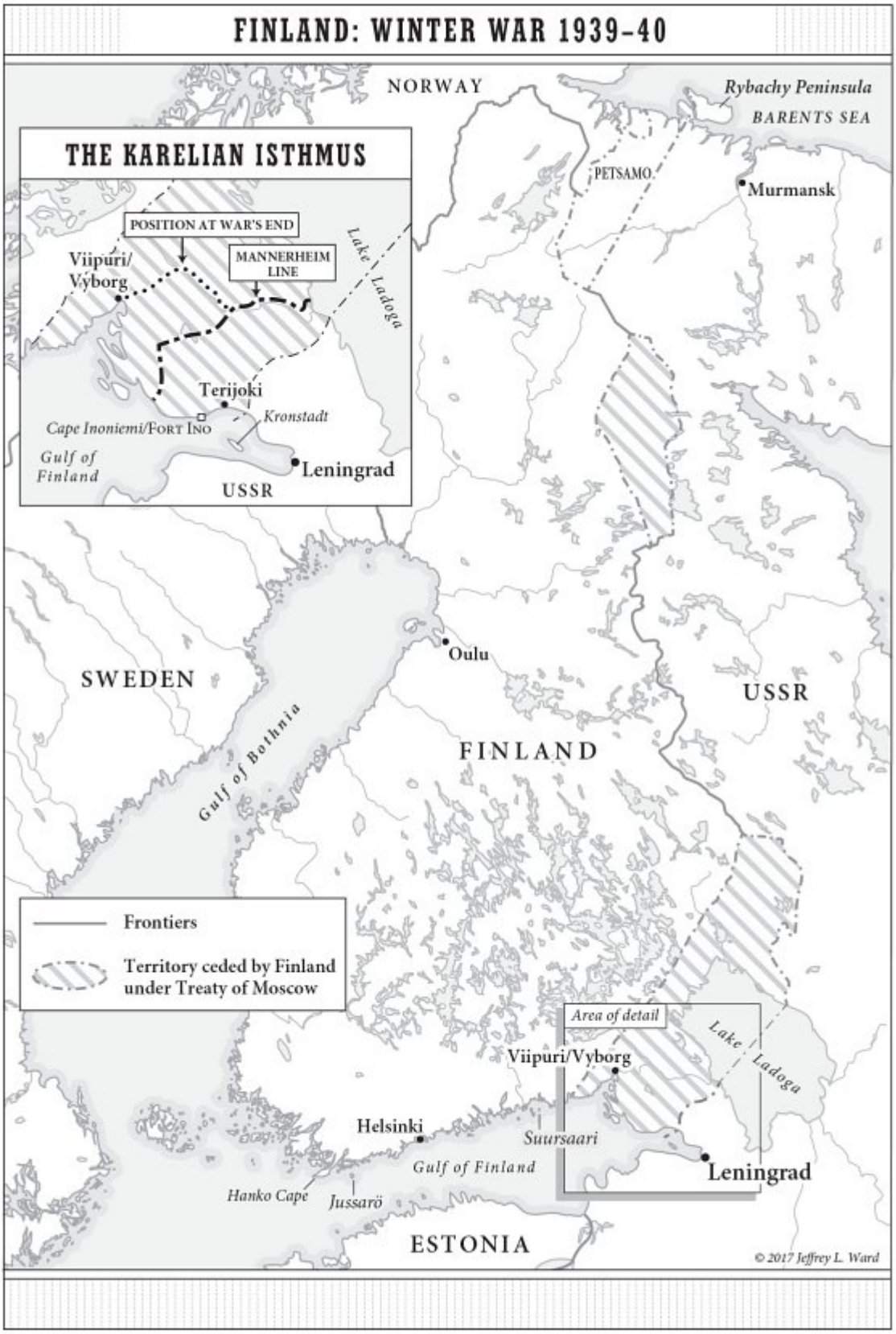
FINLAND: WINTER WAR 1939–40
NORWAY
Rybachy Peninsula
BARENTS SEA
PETSAMO
Murmansk
THE KARELIAN ISTHMUS
POSITION AT WAR'S END
MANNERHEIM LINE
Viipuri/ Vyborg
Lake Ladoga
Terijoki
Cape Inoniemi/Fort Ino
Kronstadt
Gulf of Finland
Leningrad
USSR
Oulu
SWEDEN
USSR
Gulf of Bothnia
FINLAND
Frontiers
Territory ceded by Finland under Treaty of Moscow
Area of detail
Lake Ladoga
Viipuri/Vyborg
Helsinki
Suursaari
Gulf of Finland
Leningrad
Hanko Cape
Jussarö
ESTONIA
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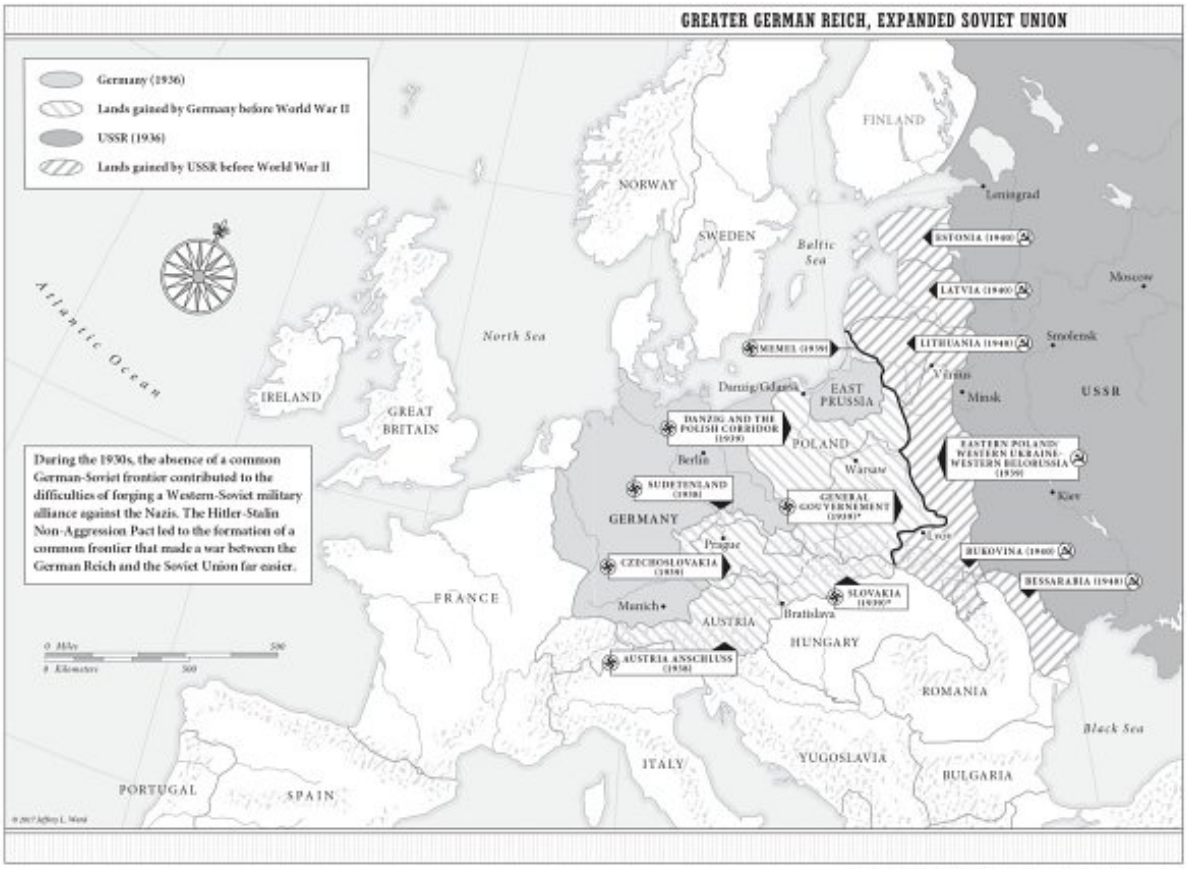

*Neither Slovakia nor the General Gouvernement was incorporated into the Reich.

———PART I———

EQUAL TO THE MYTH

> Here he is, the greatest and most important of our contemporaries. . . . In his full size he towers over Europe and Asia, over the past and the present. He is the most famous and yet almost the least known man in the world.
>
> HENRI BARBUSSE, Stalin, *1935*[1]

IOSIF STALIN WAS A HUMAN BEING. He collected watches.[2] He played skittles and billiards. He loved gardening and Russian steam baths.[3] He owned suits and ties but never wore them, unlike Lenin, and, unlike Bukharin, he did not fancy traditional peasant blouses or black leather jackets. He wore a semi-military tunic of either gray or khaki color, buttoned at the top, along with baggy khaki trousers that he tucked into his tall leather boots. He did not use a briefcase, but he sometimes carried documents inside folders or wrapped in newspapers.[4] He liked colored pencils—blue, red, green—manufactured by Moscow's Sacco and Vanzetti factory (originally built by the American Armand Hammer). He drank Borjomi mineral water and red Khvanchkara and white Tsinandali wines from his native Georgia. He smoked a pipe, using the tobacco from Herzegovina Flor brand cigarettes, which he would unroll and slide in, usually two cigarettes' worth. He kept his desk in order. His dachas had runners atop the carpets, and he strove to keep to the narrow coverings. "I remember, once he spilled a few ashes from his pipe on the carpet," recalled Artyom Sergeyev, who for a time lived in the Stalin household after his own father's death, "and he himself, with a brush and knife, gathered them up."[5]

Stalin had a passion for books, which he marked up and filled with placeholders to find passages. (His personal library would ultimately grow to more than 20,000 volumes.) He annotated works by Marx and Lenin, but also Plato and the German strategist Clausewitz in translation, as well as Alexander Svechin, a former tsarist officer whom Stalin never trusted but who demonstrated that the only constant in war was an absence of constants.[6] "Stalin read a great deal," noted Artyom. "And always, when we saw him, he would ask what I was reading and what I thought about it. At the entrance to his study, I recall, there was a mountain of books on the floor." Stalin recommended the classics—Gogol, Tolstoy—telling Artyom and Vasily that "during wartime there would be a lot of situations you had never encountered before in life. You will need to make decisions. But if you read a lot, then in your memory you will already have the answers how to conduct yourself and what to do.

Literature will tell you."[7] Among Russian authors, Stalin's favorite was probably Chekhov, who, he felt, portrayed villains, not just heroes, in the round. Still, judging by the references scattered among his writings and speeches, he spent more time reading Soviet-era belles lettres.[8] His jottings in whatever he read were often irreverent: "Rubbish," "Fool," "Scumbag," "Piss off," "Ha-ha!"

His manners were coarse. When, on April 5, 1930, a top official in the economy drew a black-ink caricature of finance commissar Nikolai Bryukhanov hanging by his scrotum, Stalin wrote on it, "To members of the politburo: For all his current and future sins Bryukhanov is to be hung by the balls; if his balls hold, he is to be considered acquitted by the court; if his balls do not hold, he is to be drowned in the river."[9] But Stalin cultivated a statesmanlike appearance, editing out his jokes and foul language even from the transcripts of official gatherings that were meant to be circulated only internally.[10] He occasionally jabbed the air with his index finger for emphasis during speeches, but he usually avoided histrionics. "All Stalin's gestures were measured," Artyom recalled. "He never gesticulated severely." Artyom also found his adoptive father reserved in his compliments. "Stalin never used expressions of the highest degree: marvelous [*chudesno*], elegant [*shikarno*]. He said 'fine' [*khorosho*]. He never went higher than 'fine.' He could also say 'suitable' [*goditsia*]. 'Fine' was the highest compliment from his mouth."[11]

Stalin invoked God casually ("God forbid," "Lord forgive us") and referred to the Pharisees and other biblical subjects.[12] In his hometown of Gori, he had lived across from the cathedral, attended the parish school, sung beatifically in the choir, and set his sights on becoming a priest or a monk, earning entrance to the Tiflis seminary, where he prayed nine to ten times per day and completed the full course of study except for sitting his last year's final exams. By then he had become immersed in banned literature, beginning with Victor Hugo, evolving toward Karl Marx, and had come to detest organized religion and abandoned his piety.[13] Rumors that Stalin attended church services in the 1930s have never been substantiated.[14] In Stalin's marginalia in works by Dostoevsky and Anatole France, he continued to be drawn to issues of God, the church, religion, and immortality, but the depth and nature of that interest remain difficult to fathom.[15] Be that as it may, he had long ago ceased to adhere to Christian notions of good and evil.[16] His moral universe was that of Marxism-Leninism.

He appears to have had few mistresses, and definitely no harem. His family life was neither particularly happy nor unhappy. His father, Beso, had died relatively young, not uncommon in the early twentieth century; his mother, Keke, lived alone in Tiflis. His first wife, Ketevan "Kato" Svanidze, a Georgian to whom he was married in 1906, had died in agony the next year of a common disease in Baku. He married again, to Nadezhda Alliluyeva, a Russian better known as Nadya, who had been born in Tiflis in 1901 and lived in Baku, too. Stalin had known her since she was a toddler. They had married in 1918, when he was officially thirty-nine (actually forty). She worked as his secretary, then as one of Lenin's secretaries, but she had higher ambitions. The couple had two healthy children, Vasily (b. 1921)

and Svetlana (b. 1926). He also had a son from his first marriage, Yakov (b. 1907), whom he had abandoned to relatives in Georgia for the first fourteen years of the boy's life. Stalin avoided contact with his many blood relatives from his father's and mother's families. He did live among in-laws—Kato's and Nadya's many brothers and sisters and their spouses—but his interest in them would wane. Personal life was subsumed in politics.

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STALIN WAS A COMMUNIST and a revolutionary. He was no Danton, the French firebrand who could mount a rostrum and ignite a crowd (until he was guillotined in 1794). Stalin spoke softly, sometimes inaudibly, because of a defect in his vocal cords. Nor was he the dashing type, like his contemporary the Italian aviator Italo Balbo (b. 1896), a Blackshirt *squadrista* who, a jaunty cigarette dangling from his lips, lived the fascist ideal of the "new man," leading armadas of planes in formation across the Mediterranean and then the Atlantic, attaining international renown (until he died in a crash caused by his own country's antiaircraft guns).[17] Stalin turned white during air travel and avoided it. He relished being called Koba, after the Georgian folk-hero avenger and the real-life benefactor who underwrote his education, but one childhood chum had called him Geza, a Gori-dialect term for the awkward gait Stalin had developed after an accident. He had to swing his hip all the way around to walk.[18] This and other physical defects apparently weighed on him. Once, near his beloved medicinal baths at Matsesta, in the Caucasus, according to a bodyguard, Stalin encountered a boy of about six, "reached out his hand and asked, 'What's your name?' 'Valka,' the boy answered firmly. 'Well, my name is Smallpox-Pockmarks,' Stalin said to him. 'Now we are introduced.'"[19]

Like the twisted spine of Shakespeare's Richard III, it is tempting to find in such deformities the wellsprings of bloody tyranny: torment, self-loathing, inner rage, bluster, a mania for adulation. The boy at Matsesta was around the age Stalin had been when he had contracted the disease whose lifelong scars he bore on his nose, lower lip, chin, and cheeks. His pockmarks were airbrushed from public photographs, and his awkward stride kept from public view. (Film of him walking was prohibited.) People who met him saw the facial disfigurement and odd movement, as well as signs that he might be insecure. He loved jokes and caricatures, but never about himself. (Of course, the supposedly ultraconfident Lenin had refused to allow even friendly caricatures of himself to be printed.)[20] Stalin's sense of humor was perverse. Those who encountered him further discovered that he had a limp handshake and was not as tall as he appeared in photographs. (He stood five feet seven inches, or about 1.7 meters, roughly the same as Napoleon and one inch shorter than Hitler, who was 1.73 meters.)[21] And yet, despite their initial shock—could *this* be Stalin?—most first-time onlookers usually found that they could not take their gaze off him, especially his expressive eyes.[22] More than that, they witnessed him shouldering an immense load, under

colossal pressure. Stalin possessed the skills and steeliness to rule a great country, unlike Shakespeare's Richard III. He radiated charisma, the charisma of dictatorial power.

Dictatorship, in the wake of the Great War, was widely understood to offer a transcendence of the mundane, a "state of exception," in the words of the future Nazi theorist Carl Schmitt.[23] For Soviet theorists, too, dictatorship promised political dynamism and the redemption of humanity. In April 1929, Vladimir Maksimovsky (b. 1887), who had known and once opposed Lenin (over the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with imperial Germany) and had supported Trotsky's right to be heard, delivered a lecture on Niccolò Machiavelli that he published the same year in the USSR's main Marxist history journal. Maksimovsky turned the Renaissance Florentine into a theorist of "revolutionary bourgeois dictatorship," which the author deemed progressive in its day, in contrast to the reactionary dictatorship of Mussolini. The assessment rested on the class base. Thus, the working-class Soviet dictatorship was progressive, too. Maksimovsky, following Machiavelli, conceded that dictatorship could descend into tyranny, with a ruler pursuing purely personal interests.[24] But Maksimovsky did not explicitly address the question of a given dictator's personality, or how the process of exercising unlimited power affects a ruler's character. Subsequent scholars have rightly noted that only a near-permanent state of emergency—made possible by Communist ideology and practice—allowed Stalin to give free rein to his savagery. But what has been missed is that Stalin's sociopathology was to a degree an outgrowth of the experience of dictatorial rule.

Stalin's childhood, diseases and all, had been more or less normal; his years as general secretary were anything but.[25] He emerged from the 1920s a ruler of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. He could flash burning anger, visible in yellowish eyes; he could glow with a soft, capacious smile. He could be utterly solicitous and charming; he could be unable to forget a perceived slight and compulsively contrive opportunities for revenge. He was single-minded and brooding, soft-spoken and foul-mouthed. He prided himself on his voracious reading and his ability to quote the wisdom of Marx or Lenin; he resented fancy-pants intellectuals who he thought put on airs. He possessed a phenomenal memory and a mind of scope; his intellectual horizons were severely circumscribed by primitive theories of class struggle and imperialism. He developed a feel for the aspirations of the masses and incipient elites; he almost never visited factories or farms, or even state agencies, reading about the country he ruled in secret reports and newspapers. He was a cynic about everyone's supposed base motives; he lived and breathed ideals. Above all, his core identity was as heir and leading pupil of Lenin, but Lenin's purported Testament had called for his removal, and from the time it first appeared, in the spring and summer of 1923, the document haunted him, provoking at least six resignations, all of which had been rejected but left him embattled, resentful, vengeful.

Stalin's painstaking creation of a personal dictatorship within the Leninist dictatorship had combined chance (the unexpected early death of Lenin) and aptitude: he had been the fifth secretary of the party, after Yakov Sverdlov (who

also died prematurely), Yelena Stasova, Nikolai Krestinsky, and Vyacheslav Molotov. His self-fashioning as savior of cause and country who was menaced from every direction dovetailed with fears for the socialist revolution and Russia's revival as a great power menaced from every direction. Lenin's party, with its seizure of power in the former Russian empire, had enacted upon itself a condition of "capitalist encirclement," a structural paranoia that fed, and was fed by, Stalin's personal paranoia. But those feelings on his part, whatever their now untraceable origins, had ballooned in his accumulation and enactment of the power of life and death over hundreds of millions. Such were the paradoxes of power: the closer the country got to achieving socialism, the sharper the class struggle became; the more power Stalin personally wielded, the more he still needed. Triumph shadowed by treachery became the dynamic of both the revolution and Stalin's life. Beginning in 1929, as the might of the Soviet state and Stalin's personal dictatorship grew and grew, so, too, did the stakes. His drive to build socialism would prove both successful and shattering, and deeply reinforcing of his hypersuspicious, vindictive disposition.[26] "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," an English Catholic historian wrote in a private letter in reference to the Inquisition and the papacy.[27] Absolute power also shapes absolutely.

Communism was an idea, a dream palace whose attraction derived from its seeming fusion of science and utopia. In the Marxist conception, capitalism had created great wealth by replacing feudalism, but then it became a "fetter" that promoted only the interests of the exploiter class, at the expense of the rest of humanity. But once capitalism was overcome, the "forces of production" would be unleashed as never before. What is more, exploitation, colonies, and imperialist war would give way to solidarity, emancipation, and peace, as well as abundance. Concretely, socialism had been difficult to imagine.[28] But whatever it was, it could not be capitalism. Logically, socialism would be built by eradicating private property, the market, and "bourgeois" parliaments and putting in their place collective property, socialist planning, and people's power (or soviets). Of course, the capitalists would never allow themselves to be buried. They would fight to the death against socialism, using every means—wrecking, espionage, lies—because this was a war in which only one class could emerge victorious. The most terrible crimes became morally imperative acts in the name of creating paradise on earth.[29]

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MASS VIOLENCE RECRUITED legions ready to battle implacable enemies who stood on the wrong side of history.[30] The purported science of Marxism-Leninism and the real-world construction of socialism, on the way toward Communism, offered ostensible answers to the biggest questions: why the world had so many problems (class) and how it could be made better (class warfare), with a role for all. People's otherwise insignificant lives became linked to building an entirely new world.[31] To collect grain forcibly or operate a lathe was to strike a hammer blow at world imperialism. It did not hurt that those who took part stood to gain personally:

idealism and opportunism are always reinforcing.[32] Accumulated resentments, too, fueled the aspiration to become significant. People under the age of twenty-nine made up nearly half of the Soviet population, giving the country one of the younger demographic profiles in the world, and youth proved especially attracted to a vision that put them at the center of a struggle to build tomorrow today, to serve a higher truth.[33] The use of capitalism as antiworld also helps explain why, despite the improvisation, the socialism that would be built under Stalin coalesced into a "system" that could be readily explained within the framework of the October Revolution.

Stalin personified Communism's lofty vision. A cult would be built around him, singling him out as "*vozhd*," an ancient word that denoted someone who had earned the leadership of a group of men through a demonstrated ability to acquire and dispense rewards, but had become tantamount to "supreme leader," the Russian equivalent of *duce* or *Führer*.[34] By acclaiming Stalin, people could acclaim the cause and themselves as devotees. He resisted the cult.[35] Stalin would call himself shit compared with Lenin.[36] In draft reportage for *Pravda* of his meeting with a collective farm delegation from Odessa province in November 1933, he inserted the names Mikhail Kalinin, Molotov, Lazar Kaganovich, simulating collective leadership.[37] Similarly, according to Anastas Mikoyan, Stalin rebuked Kaganovich, saying, "What is this? Why do you praise me alone, as if one man decides everything?"[38] Whether Stalin's objections reflected false modesty, genuine embarrassment, or just his inscrutable self remains hard to say, but he indulged the prolonged ovations.[39] Molotov would recall that "at first he resisted the cult of personality, but then he came to like it a bit."[40]

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STALIN ALSO PERSONIFIED the multinational Union. The USSR, like imperial Russia, was a uniquely Eurasian sprawl across two continents, at home in neither. Stalin was skeptical that nationality would eventually wither, unlike many leftists who worshipped class.[41] Nation, for him, was both stubborn fact and opportunity, a device for overcoming perceived backwardness.[42] Implanting loyal party rule in, say, Ukraine or his native Georgia would preoccupy him, but not nearly as much as the history and geopolitics of Russia.[43] Russia had come to see itself as a providential power ordained by God, with a special mission in the world. Its court splendor surpassed any other monarchy, but for all its industrialization it had remained an agrarian empire resting on the backs of peasants. Resources never stretched as far as ambitions, a discrepancy compounded by the circumstance that Russia lacked natural boundaries. This had spurred conquest of neighboring lands, before they could be used as presumed springboards of invasion, thereby creating a dynamic of "defensive" expansionism. Such was the Russia that the Georgian inherited and wholly devoted himself to as the socialist motherland.

A human being, a Communist and revolutionary, a dictator encircled by enemies in a dictatorship encircled by enemies, a fearsome contriver of class

warfare, an embodiment of the global Communist cause and the Eurasian multinational state, a ferocious champion of Russia's revival, Stalin did what acclaimed leaders do: he articulated and drove toward a consistent goal, in his case a powerful state backed by a unified society that eradicated capitalism and built industrial socialism.[44] "Murderous" and "mendacious" do not begin to describe the person readers will encounter in this volume. At the same time, Stalin galvanized millions. His colossal authority was rooted in a dedicated faction, which he forged, a formidable apparatus, which he built, and Marxist-Leninist ideology, which he helped synthesize. But his power was magnified many times over by ordinary people, who projected onto him their soaring ambitions for justice, peace, and abundance, as well as national greatness. Dictators who amass great power often retreat into pet pursuits, expounding interminably about their obsessions, paralyzing the state. But Stalin's fixation was a socialist great power. In the years 1929–36, covered in part III, he would build that socialist great power with a first-class military. Stalin was a myth, but he proved equal to the myth.