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Forging the Man of Steel

Great men are not born, they are made. History is shaped by great leaders who owing to their personal features, a chance, and to the peculiarity of their time leave their mark on the course of history. But “before he could remake his society, his society must make him” (Spencer 166). Napoleon was a product of the French Revolution, while Hitler came to power amidst chaos and thirst for vengeance after the First World War, but what if they were not born? To understand the “what ifs” in history, you have to first understand, that a great man does not create historical reality himself, but only uncovers the inevitable future (Hegel).

In Russia, for example, the overthrow of the Tsar, the abolition of peasantry and the forced industrialization were in the air for many decades. Society was constantly forging hundreds of “potential Stalins” in the form of a desperate and radical intelligentsia, who were meant to do the job that had to be done. However, most of them were not fit for the task. Each try of the Russian society had a tiny chance of success, but inevitably one had to succeed by the law of big numbers. That great man of Russian society was a Georgian called Soso Jughashvili. He was the person leading Russia from feudalism to the space age with his iron will. However, before the Bolshevik revolution he was just a rebel chased by the Russian police through Siberia’s endless steppes with *The Communist Manifesto* in his pocket. The rise of this man could not have happened without his absolute belief in Marxism, and the chaos the Russian revolution created. Therefore, to explain the incredible career of this man, it is more important to look at what factors affected his life than to look at his personality. Following this logic, Stephen Kotkin focused his biography of *Stalin* more on the context than on the person and therefore it provides us a thorough overview of why Stalin rose to power.

Russia was a country with a long history of despotic rulers with totalitarian power over every institution. They were often blamed for being a burden on progress. The lands in Eastern Europe were always at least one step behind in development compared to the West as a result of low population density and the distance from major trade hubs. Well after the collapse of the Roman Empire and the formation of the great Empires of the Byzantines and the Franks, Eastern Europe was ruled merely by tribes. When Western Europe was already gazing west towards the New World, the Grand Duchy of Moscow was still looking East worrying about terrible attacks from the Tatars. Russia arrived in the twentieth century, the century of the great democratic, industrialized nations, only as an autocratic and feudalistic country, but with great ambitions.

Fighting for its imperial status, Russia “became the fifth largest industrial power” with the lead of its genius prime minister, Witte (Kotkin 65). However, this fact reflected the country’s sheer size only, not its modernity. The geography of Russia was favourable for expansion, which the Tsars had been exploiting for centuries to create one of the largest empires. On the other hand, Russian society remained backward. All the power was concentrated in the Tsar’s hand, rich people had no say in politics, minorities were suppressed, 80% of the population were still peasants, and the general living conditions were poor. There was also a large number of educated jobless young people, who were dissatisfied with the Tsarist system. This class, called intelligentsia, posed the most danger to the regime as they demanded radical changes from the Tsar. One of these radical minded youths was Soso Jugashvili. He grew up in poor conditions, but found support in the radical groups, and he himself became wholeheartedly Marxist.

The weaknesses of Russian society and its economy resurfaced over and over again after each war the Tsars had lost. First, after the Crimean war against the major powers of Europe, which prompted the Tsar to reform some of the institutions. However, there was little

change in the society and when Russia went to war for Manchuria and Korea against Japan and lost, the discontent of the people fired up the 1905 revolution. The revolution was drowned in blood by Durnovo, who practically saved the autocracy. Nevertheless, 1905 left many lasting marks on society with the radical groups that became well organized during that period, including many Communist parties. After the revolution both Durnovo and Witte knew that “a new war would prove fatal for Russia and the dynasty” and yet the Tsar went to war once again (Kotkin 136). Russia did not really have a choice whether to join the First World War or not. The Tsar wanted to defend his prestige after two lost wars but more importantly, Russia had to repay its debts to France and did not want to lose the struggle over the control of the Balkans.

The First World War created incredible disruption in everyday life paving the way to a revolution. People who never cared about politics and have never seen electricity before were fighting with machine guns in their hands against countries they had never heard about. They saw the backwardness of the peasant life and the new grand ideas such as communism promised a solution to that. In the trenches they became heavily politicized, and the tragedies of the war made them dissatisfied with the Tsarist rule. In the hinterland women were massively mobilized to work in factories, which broke thousand year old traditions, and empowered the women to demand better living standards. In addition, supplies were massively taken from peasants further alienating them from the regime. In the meantime, the war also created many revolutionary groups, one of which was the Bolsheviks, that fought their own war with the secret police.

The situation was set for a revolution. All conditions crucial for a revolution, which Jack Goldstone discusses in *Revolutions: a very short introduction*, were present in 1917 (Goldstone 19). The economy was in ruins and could not provide for the basic needs of the population. The financial system was non-existent and famine was every day. The citizens

were alienated from the Tsar because of its military failures and he represented the whole regime. People started believing that the bad conditions were the fault of bad governance and did not fear striking in opposition to their circumstances. The rich and the aristocracy also started to question the legitimacy of the Tsar. Anger at the injustice became widespread and popular as a result of the speeches of the radical leaders, whom Germany supported. Even the army was dysfunctional due to mutinies and thousands of deserters. All these factors resulted in a general state breakdown since the Tsar lost control of the population who struck most of the time; the police, who did not shoot back anymore at the protesters; and of its territories, many of which were controlled by soviets.

Proving Goldstone's theory the revolution in Russia was started by the elite who had the power to express their dissatisfaction. The Tsar was advised to abdicate by his own advisors and this coup meant basically the start of the revolution. The elite formed a Provisional Government, which would have taken the power until the constitution was established. They gave power to the Russian parliament, the Duma meaning that the largest radical groups could finally freely express their opinions in the government. However, the Provisional Government was doomed to fail eventually. It did not provide solution to any of the issues the government faced. The ruling elite remained the same and they continued the same mistakes of the Tsar by not exiting the war. In this "unstable equilibrium" (Goldstone 15) only a small push was needed to set another revolution in motion, which was given by a smaller party, the Bolsheviks.

The following October Revolution finally gave the people the change they demanded. A completely new, communist elite came to power. The idea of another coup was always in the minds of the radicals, but they did not get any further than planning. In October, however, after the second All Russia Soviet Congress the mood became extremely tense and revolutionary. The Bolsheviks organized speeches everywhere, but once the mass was set into

motion nobody could stop it. There were lots of hasty decisions but the fact that they still succeeded proves the extreme weakness of the Provisional Government. Soldiers joined the revolutionaries and they took over all strategic points in Petrograd. Hearing the news the Provisional Government evaporated and the Bolsheviks filled the vacuum in the power immediately. Since they initiated the coup they had the upper hand in taking control for the time being.

“The Bolshevik dictatorship was not an utter accident, of course” (Kotkin 231) The country was decisively socialist, and there were no other non-socialist peasant parties, who would have won the support of the population’s majority. In addition, the Bolsheviks also benefitted from the propaganda work of other socialist parties, while they suppressed all of them. “The dictatorship was an act of creation” which Lenin began immediately after taking power. He used the chaos as justification for his extreme measures. He even managed to make the Bolshevik Central Committee vote to give him, Trotsky, Sverdlov and Stalin full power in decision making. However, not everybody was happy with their rule since they were still not the largest party, and soon armed clashes broke out between the different camps and as a result Lenin began to lose his grip on the party. At this point nobody thought the Bolsheviks would last longer than a few years.

The violent clashes grew into a full blown civil war when the Czechoslovak legion rose up, claimed the power, followed by several other parties. On the one side of the civil war we can find the Whites. Their camp did not have a central decision making entity, because it was only a loose alliance of various anti-Bolshevik forces with different motivations. Ideologically they were everything from monarchist, rightist to republicans. They included a lot of the rich liberal bourgeoisie, who wanted a more democratic system, which would support capitalism. The camp also compromised land-owners, who knew that communism would mean the collectivization of private property, including land. Of course we can find on

this counterrevolutionary side the people who still support the former Tsarist system. In addition to these internal enemies, Britain, France, Japan and the USA all supported the Whites with troops and supplies as they wanted to resume the fights on the eastern front but later on a strong Bolshevik Russia would also endanger their imperialistic plans.

On the other side, there are the Reds meaning the Bolsheviks without many allies. Their camp was made up of the intelligentsia, who dreamed about the realization of Communism. Most of the workers also supported the Bolsheviks as it was mainly a worker's party. However, there was one very important difference between the two sides: while Bolsheviks were good at winning over political bases, "[t]he whites neither understood nor showed any interest in societal problems. All their hopes were focused on military victory" (Kotkin 325). As a result, the Bolshevik camp was constantly growing by winning over peasants by promising to give them land, which was a decisive factor in the Red's victory. Some of the minorities allied the Bolsheviks who promised equal rights in the future Soviet Union. However, most of the minorities were still aiming at separation by fighting both sides and by establishing their own independent states such as Turkestan, Ukraine, Finland and Georgia.

Empty words are of course not persuasive and the Bolsheviks had to deliver those promises. First of all, they had to exit the World War. After several failed attempts, they managed to negotiate an unfavourable agreement with Germany in Brest-Litovsk to the close the fighting. They lost most of Ukraine's grain lands, but it was not important as the real enemy were the Whites and they had to focus everything on the internal struggle. Secondly, they had to give land to the peasants to keep their support. It seemed an easy task as they simply took the land from the rich land-owners but that only meant "on average one acre per person", which is not enough to make a difference (Kotkin 241). More importantly, they abolished all the debts of peasants. Thirdly, they had to provide food to the population, which

proved to be the hardest task. It required precise management and the Red Army had to lead offenses to take control over some of the more fertile agricultural areas.

The civil war forged the Bolshevik party into an organized government. Lenin had to compile an army that can win a war and had to organize the supply chain of that army so that the soldiers received ammunition and food. The creation of the Red army is the achievement of Trotsky. He put aside his ideology and started conscripting peasants into the army and “giving command posts to tsarist officers” who were constantly supervised by Commissars to make sure they stay loyal to the Bolsheviks (Kotkin 310). The government introduced the system of war communism, which was based on the nationalization of industries, requisition and redistribution of agricultural products and the Red terror by the Cheka. All of this was in order to focus all the resources on the war effort and to intimidate the population to prevent uprisings.

While the First World War ended with Germany’s capitulation, the Reds and the Whites were still fighting. “Both sides were similarly low quality but the Reds would nonetheless push the whites back” thanks to the successful stream of all available resources into the war and the expanding political base (Kotkin 333). In the first years the Red army was squeezed in a tiny area, but they managed to stop the White advance, started reclaiming the territories of former Russia and even led an unsuccessful expansionist skirmish against Poland. The war lasted several years and claimed the lives of many millions, but in the end the Bolsheviks had a strong grip on power. However, the country was still in ruins and the post-war “[e]conomic output did not even reach one sixth of the pre-1914 level”, meaning the fight for survival did not end yet (Kotkin 405).

Following the civil war, one person rose above all other: Stalin. He used the chaos and the party to build a network that helped him climb the ladder. In the beginning even though he counted only as the fourth most important man in the party, he was always the closest to

Lenin, whom he never argued with and fully trusted. He proved to be overly ambitious, “rabidly partisan towards class thinking and autodidacts, headstrong and prickly, attentive to political lessons but militarily ignorant” and always insisted on Marxist theories (Kotkin 378). This led to several mistakes during the civil war, for example several military failures in the Civil War and the Russia-Polish war and he also strongly opposed Trotsky’s idea of the Red Army, which won the war for the Bolsheviks. Yet because of his “tenacious dedication to the revolutionary cause and to the state’s power”, organizational skills and love for work remained an important member of the party, moreover he managed to expand his influence (Kotkin 424). In 1922 Lenin appointed him General Secretariat after Sverdlov’s death and several failures for his replacement. Stalin proved to be the perfect man for the position. He was a real “ward-boss-style politician”, he loved working with the people, was hard working and a good organizer, but he also had an incredible memory (Kotkin 425).

“Stalin became now the only person simultaneously in the politburo, orgburo and secretariat”, which meant his hands reached everywhere (Kotkin 424). Certain qualities of the party such as conspiratorial secrecy and central appointments afforded sway over information. Using this he built an extensive network of allies in the party and divided and conquered his enemies, which ultimately led to his dictatorship. After the death of Lenin he managed to isolate with the support of his network Trotsky and his other enemies, who were eventually ejected from the party. In the end, he obtained full control over the party, which also meant full control over the whole state. However, “Stalin’s machine was not tsarist autocracy... but a modern one-party dictatorship” and he only used his power to fulfil his ideology (Kotkin 430).

Stalin realized the survival of the Bolsheviks was still threatened from all directions. All other Communist movements failed in Europe and they remained alone. First of all, the Bolsheviks had to revive the economy. To do so after many arguments and wide opposition

Lenin broke with the idea of a Marxist economy in favour of market economy in the New Economic Policy. The market economy resulted in a quick boom but after Lenin's death Stalin was not satisfied with the results, because it did not solve the problem of frequent famines but most importantly he was already preparing for another World War. In his mind communism could not exist without the strong political base of workers, who are created in the factories. He knew without tanks, industry and a modern war economy, he cannot spread communism and he would not even have a chance against Poland if it decided to attack. All this, however, could not have happened without the support of the party, who saw in Stalin the person who actually created something and lead the country to a prosperous future.

The ultimate plan was to industrialize the Soviet Union - "one sixth of the earth" - by collectivizing all industries and selling grain to buy modern equipment for factories (Kotkin 675). Stalin's reckless gambling with the wholesale collectivization destroyed most incentives to produce any kind of agricultural goods and dragged the economy into turmoil once again. The only reason why he survived is the Great Depression, when Western economies were desperately seeking buyers for their products and technologies. "The world's misfortune was Stalin's great unforeseen fortune" because this meant he could continue with industrialization (Kotkin 893). Stalin was a deep believer in Marxism and was prepared to give anything to secure the position of communist Russia including millions of lives. Since he only cared about the long-term, he was mostly ready to collaborate with Germans, capitalists. The only thing that mattered was the future of the Soviet Union and he had to figure out the road to it by himself as The Communist Manifesto does not give any real explanation of how the grand revolution or the state governance would happen.

Until the start of his program the person of Stalin was not important. He was just one of the many easily replaceable cogs in the machine, but he grew into something more. Russian society, the events of the 19th century and most importantly Marxism created a man that

made a change in the world. *The Communist Manifesto* never predicted a communist revolution in a backward country like Russia, but without Marx's book and its influence on the population history would have been drastically different. If Stalin did not start to entirely rearrange the socioeconomic landscape of one sixth of the world by launching collectivization in order to prepare for a grand war, Nazi Germany might have won the Second World War. There would have been no Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union. As Kotkin shows the radicalization and rise of Stalin happened as Hegel described: as a result of the circumstances and events. Once he got into his position, however, his behaviour became unpredictable when he started collectivizing. So Hegel was not right when he said a "great man does not create historical reality" in the sense that Stalin made decisions no one else could have made.

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