

People

Stalin Face to Face

by Hugh Lunghi

As interpreter with Winston Churchill at his great encounters with the Russian leader, Mr. Lunghi had a rare opportunity to study Stalin at close quarters.

Stalin has been dead ten years and buried twice—once mummified and on display in the mausoleum in Red Square, and then out of sight at the foot of the Kremlin wall.

In Russia eighteen months ago three people said to me, "Stalin has gone, but his shadow is still with us." But only one of them, an older man said it with a shudder, as though the ghost might yet materialise.

According to latter-day Communist Party leaders who knew him—led by Khrushchev—the man who created the long-lasting shadow was clearly a monster, guilty of unspeakable cruelties, bestialities, mockeries, outrages; a mass murderer. I observed Stalin closely over a period of six years, and he could give a totally different impression.

At the war-time conferences and banquets I saw and heard Western leaders praise and flatter Stalin in public and private, and in turn be flattered by him. I saw them shake him warmly by the hand which (so Mr. Khrushchev has since told us) was responsible for the deaths of "thousands of absolutely innocent people". I shook that hand myself on many occasions, was patted on the back by it, and received glasses of tea from it.

Had I been in a position to add my praise and flattery, no doubt I should have done so with the rest—at least to begin with. Only later, and perhaps because as an interpreter I could stand back and observe the man and some of his mental processes, did I wonder.

Part of the answer to the riddle lay in his contrived inaccessibility. The build-up of atmosphere before one even approached the gates of the Kremlin had its effect, if only subconsciously, on even the most hardened statesmen.

We, and all foreign visitors, were always instructed to report to

the Borovitsky Gate of the Kremlin, at the farthest point diagonally from Stalin's quarters.

We drove to the Kremlin past clusters of three or more police permanently stationed at each road junction, who telephoned the next cross-roads, and thus passed us down the route.

A black saloon pilot-car led the way up the fifty-yard drive to the main portal. As soon as we passed the outer gate a bell, set off by a photo-electric cell, started ringing continuously. The arched portal contained guard rooms on either side, and a major of the MVD, the blue-capped, uniformed secret police, inspected our chauffeur's documents and peered inside the car, while three or four N.C.O.s on guard duty stood around. All wore revolvers.

Only when we emerged from the gateway inspection did the warning bell stop ringing.

In the entrance hall of the Kazakov Senate House we would be saluted by another pistol-carrying MVD guard of a colonel and two or three captains and lieutenants. A lift took us, in the charge of the colonel, slowly up two floors, and down long and high corridors, at each turn of which stood one of the armed praetorian guards to the remote place where Stalin waited.

Apart from the armed guards, the corridors were deserted. There was the same chilling silence inside the building as outside in the deserted grounds. An odour of Makhorka, the coarse black Russian tobacco, reminiscent of stale cabbage, seemed faintly to pervade the building.

Massive double doors were padded with greenish-brown quilted hide. Through one pair we entered the ante-chambers of Stalin's suite. A small posse of armed officers, the personal bodyguard, clustered at one side of the ante-chamber, at their head a squat man in the uniform of a general. Without announcing us, he quietly opened the double doors leading into a panelled study-conference room.

At the other end of it, a few paces in front of a desk, stood a humble-looking little old man. His withered left arm was somehow drawn up and bent at the elbow so that his upturned hand rested against his solar plexus. His right hand was cupped under the left one.

He wore a plain grey tunic buttoning right up at the neck, and decorated only by the small gold star of a Hero of the Soviet Union. His trousers, with sharp creases, were very wide, so that they only just revealed the tapering, square-ended shoes with built-up heels. He looked like an old-fashioned uncle.

As we entered he took a step or two towards us over the fine carpet, his interpreter just behind and at his side. Stooping, with his head slightly inclined, so that he looked nobody in the eye, Stalin shook hands with all our party. His grip was firm but not heavy; his hand not large, but square and rather soft. The hand-

shaking was repeated all round with the inter-eter in grave and formal courtesy.

Stalin invited us to sit at the long green-vaize conference table, extending along two-thirds of the side of the thirty-foot room, on the straight-backed dust-sheeted chairs, at the end nearest his own flat-topped desk. On his desk stood three round upright containers filled with dozens of sharpened pencils, a couple of pads, a heavy marble inkstand with cut-glass wells of red and blue, and a marble-based metal table-lamp.

Stalin sat, not at the head of the table, but opposite us with his back to the wall, on which hung portraits of Russia's great captains of the past, Suvorov, and Napoleon's opponent, Kutuzov. Our backs were to the windows, which at night were curtained with white-silk blinds.

On the table were ashtrays and several green-and-gold striped boxes of Dukat and Luxe, the top-quality Russian cigarettes with cardboard holders. Stalin would help himself to these frequently. Only once or twice in six years did I see him smoking his pipe.

During the talks Stalin would pick up a pencil and doodle, drawing sometimes geometric figures which developed into savage-looking animals, sometimes black, thick, curved arrows like those used on military charts.

After an hour or so, glasses of lemon tea, in silver filigree holders, would be brought in with petit-fours and chocolates. No alcohol on these occasions.

Stalin can hardly have been more than 5 ft. 5in. in height; strongly and squarely built, but not broad. At this time, during the war, he was 64, but his movements were smooth and cat-like. His hair was iron grey and still fairly thick, and his moustache bushy. But his sallow skin was wrinkled and his pock-marks showed, except when thickly covered with the talcum powder he was treated with after his evening shave.

His prominent nose with its elongated nostrils appeared more hooked from the habit of narrowing and wrinkling up his rather muddy eyes.

But hardly did one recover from the surprise of seeing the remote emperor cut down before one's eyes to almost less than human size than the sound of his voice produced a second shock. It, too, was curiously colourless, his delivery flat and monotonous, with a marked Georgian accent.

Up to this time I had heard the Georgian accent only as a joke. In the music-hall, or in telling an anecdote, any Caucasian accent is to the Russian language what Wigan Pier Lancashire is to English. For the first few seconds I found it difficult to take Stalin's words seriously. It made him seem for a moment faintly ridiculous.

Stalin, I soon noticed, was deliberate in making the best of his

disadvantage. I often he liked to get his interlocutor off on the wrong foot. Though he habitually fostered the image of a modest man, telling visitors with a self-deprecatory air of humility that he owed all to "the people", he played the gambit hardest in my experience when he received Lord Mountbatten at the Potsdam Conference of 1945.

In his opening greetings and compliments, Lord Louis spoke of Stalin's achievements in peace and war. Stalin replied that he had done his best, but that really it was to the Russian people he owed everything. He returned to this theme several times during the conversation as if to play up the gulf that lay between him and his princely guest.

At the Bolshoi Theatre gala performance in honour of Churchill's visit in October, 1944, Stalin withdrew to the rear of the imperial box to allow Churchill to take the plaudits. It was only after I had seen this kind of performance on other occasions that I became convinced it was part of a calculated act to convey the picture of a modest leader in the image of Lenin; but in Stalin's case a kind of inverted vainglory, along with the apparent artless manner of his speech and the ultra simplicity of his dress.

I never saw Stalin behave in an overbearing or arrogant way to any foreigners, but he behaved thus to his own colleagues. Rarely in six years did I hear him laugh—a dry, repressed sound. The loudest laugh I heard from him was when Field-Marshal Montgomery was ragging Molotov at a Kremlin banquet. Montgomery had chaffed Molotov over the riotous and lazy life which he pretended the sombre Soviet Foreign Minister had led on visits to New York. Stalin elaborated on the joke, dragging it out until one got the uneasy feeling that there was some menace in it. Molotov would stolidly submit to being the butt of Stalin's ponderous jokes, but I never saw any sign of mutual irritation.

But I saw Maisky go pale when Stalin toasted him at a banquet, referring to him as the "poet-diplomat". There was an earlier poet-diplomat in the Russian foreign service, Alexander Griboyedov, Tsarist Ambassador to Persia. He was assassinated in his embassy in Teheran and the Tsar did not avenge his death.

One day Stalin's own interpreter, Pavlov, was scared stiff by his master. Someone had presented Pavlov with one or two volumes of Burns or some other Scots or English poet. Stalin had evidently heard about it and in his presence exclaimed in seeming jest, "Pavlov is getting too friendly with the foreigners." After that it suddenly became hard to have my usual friendly chat with Pavlov before and after meetings. I tried to invite him to meals, but he refused, even a semi-official party invitation.

At receptions a tomb-like silence descended on the company and a chill that seemed to cut off the Russians' very breath at the moment

Stalin appeared. As soon as he spoke the tension eased a bit, but did not disappear.

Never do I recall having felt physically sick at the relationship between two human beings except when I saw Vyshinsky, the diplomat and ruthless public prosecutor, in Stalin's presence. Vyshinsky behaved like a frightened dog, bending, nodding in assent, and backing away from his master, and Stalin quite clearly despised him. Before one of the conference sessions at Yalta I overheard Stalin say to a group of his lieutenants, including Vyshinsky, "With Vyshinsky all things are possible. He will jump over anything we tell him."

The gradations of fear of Stalin, which ran from the trembling aged waiters at the Kremlin banquets (with plain-clothed MVD men standing behind them—one to every two or three) up to the most beribboned military chiefs, were fascinating to observe.

He treated politicians—the Maliks, Zorins and Gromykos—and the top-rank soldiers—Bulganin, Vassilievsky, Koniev, Voronov—like messenger boys and barmen, and they behaved like that in his presence.

Among the diplomats, Litvinov seemed to me to lose least dignity and self-respect, but Litvinov always seemed withdrawn into himself. Only Molotov, more closely engaged, seemed to be free of the nagging anxiety that haunted the faces of the others. Stalin mocked him openly, and Molotov took it all impassively.

The relationship reminded me of that between a headmaster and a favourite sixth former. When technical points were under discussion, as with the currency problem during the Kremlin talks on Berlin in 1948, Molotov had done his homework and produced the answers for Stalin, sometimes leaning over to correct the master's figures. I never saw any other among Stalin's advisers dare to interrupt or correct him. At Stalin's funeral on March 9, 1953, Molotov, Malenkov and Beria delivered orations. Only Molotov is reported to have wept. I believe it.

At social functions Stalin asked admirals to get him glasses of tea, generals to fetch coffee. Bulganin, once dilating on the merits of Pertsovka, the peppery vodka served with cold sucking-pig in aspic, told me "all Soviet army generals" drank this fire-water. Perhaps it was to give them Dutch courage. Bulganin himself, sitting next to me at such a meal, kept his eyes and ears fixed on Stalin, straining to catch every word and gesture. Once, when Montgomery after dinner was asked by Stalin if he would like to see a film in the Kremlin's private cinema, and declined on the grounds that he was bent on an early start for England next day, a look of horrified disbelief seemed to pass over the faces of the assembled Soviet brass, and from the murmur I caught the word *Smelo!* ("That's bold!"). But when Stalin turned deliberately and eyed them they were silent immediately.

The nearest I ever saw to affection in Stalin was in his treatment

of Voroshilov, but there was no warmth in it. Voroshilov stood in Stalin's military ménage as a glorified old retainer. Stalin treated him rather like a useless old dog kept on as a reminder of more adventurous days. In Soviet mythology, Voroshilov was one of the great cavalry captains of the civil war against the Whites. He turned up everywhere in his marshal's uniform and was still a member of the War Council, but Stalin would humiliate him at will.

At the first plenary session of the Tehran conference Stalin said he had not expected military discussions and therefore had brought no military experts. But, he added, Voroshilov might do and would try his best. Voroshilov, who sat looking at Stalin with his beady eyes, did not bat an eyelid.

Stalin's manner towards foreigners was quite different. He was seemingly deferential, never allowed himself to be seen disconcerted, but yet liked to disconcert others. In the Kremlin in 1948, three years after Potsdam, Stalin received three Western representatives who had come to try to get some solution to the Berlin blockade. He scarcely waited for the greetings and preliminaries to be finished before he shot out at the Western delegates: "Have you any delegated authority to negotiate?" Stalin knew that the talks were meant to be only exploratory at that stage; his gambit served to grab the advantage, put the Westerners on the defensive.

He repeated the tactic at the next meeting with: "Do you want to settle the whole thing now? I've got a plan for Berlin. It is all written out ready for us all to agree to."

He blew hot and cold as it served him. He would send Churchill, and occasionally Roosevelt, abusive telegrams about the alleged failure of Allied convoys to deliver war materials to Russia. But when Churchill's envoys, Eden or Ismay, visited Stalin shortly afterwards, he would be unexpectedly full of sweetness and light. I have heard him turn from menaces to bewildering reasonableness in less than a minute; switch from elaborate courtesy to vulgar vituperation just as fast, all without raising his voice.

He practised many forms of "one-upmanship". When Montgomery once visited him he took as gifts to Stalin a couple of his own books and a case of whisky, which I carried into Stalin's study. Stalin scarcely gave a glance at the case, and his first words to Montgomery as he indicated the gifts, but before Montgomery had got through his formal greeting, were: "Yes? And what do you want from me?"

He kept the "one-upmanship" going all through that interview. Towards the end, Montgomery produced an autograph book and politely asked Stalin if he would write in it. Stalin acted as though he did not understand (though I remembered that at Potsdam Stalin himself on one occasion walked round the banquet table collecting autographs on a menu). But now he continued to affect non-comprehension, until Montgomery had been forced into the situation of

seeming to be begging. Then he rose slowly from the conference table, walked over to his desk, picked up a pen and without pause wrote in the book. Montgomery passed it to me to translate. Stalin had simply written his "regards to the British soldiers", and signed it "Stalin".

He had a flinty sneer for Churchill at Potsdam when the Briton spoke of the hardships that would face the British people in the coming winter if they were compelled by Stalin's proposals for the Ruhr to supply part of Europe with coal out of their own depleted resources. Stalin chipped in that Russia was in a far worse plight. This was true enough, but then Stalin added that he could tell the conference just how things were in Russia, but that if he did he was afraid Churchill would burst into tears. Churchill flushed slightly and looked glum.

One of the Stalin myths that still persist abroad is that he had a brilliantly rapid mind and always spoke to the point. It is true enough that he had a clear head and a good memory and kept his objective constantly in view. But if Stalin spoke briefly and to the point it was largely because he was incapable of oratory. The only times I ever heard him speak at length were in reminiscence (as when he was at pains to convince Allied leaders that he, and not Zhukov, was the victor of Berlin). On such occasions he might speak for up to three minutes.

Also, speaking through interpreters was an ideal method for Stalin. It gave him time to collect his thoughts.

Stalin on his feet had a monkish manner of clasping his hands either over his stomach or higher, keeping them clasped even when making gestures, by simply turning his palms slightly outward but without taking them from his chest, and this particular attitude symbolised for me his locked-in nature. But I saw innumerable manifestations of cruelty, harshness, craft and meanness, cold desire for vengeance, guile and suspicion, but all of them subservient to a seemingly infinite capacity to bide his time.

Stalin wore many masks. Two weaknesses impossible to hide permanently were vanity and fear. Both seemed to me compounded in an inferiority complex. Most Western leaders who met him have asserted that Stalin was a brave man. In so far as ruthlessness and fixity of purpose demand courage, Stalin possessed some portion of that quality. But if unnatural and intense preoccupation with personal safety and morbid fear of death indicate cowardice, then Stalin was also a coward at heart.

At Yalta on the day Stalin was due to come to dinner at the Vorontsov Villa, where the British delegation lived, the business of protecting Stalin's life began in the morning and was more extensive than his host, Churchill, realised. Red Army men and women constantly patrolled the gardens already, guarding the British, but that

morning reinforcements moved on to the mountain sides behind, and others strengthened the fortifications in the gardens seaward.

A magnificent wide stone staircase, leading down through the gardens, is flanked with sets of marble lions. The Russian guards inspected every one in case it held explosive. The whole roof of the villa was then searched. A few hours before time for dinner all the rooms giving on to the dining-room were locked, so that if one wished to go, say, from Churchill's map room in the Moorish section to the wing, one had to leave the villa and go round to another entrance.

A marked symptom of Stalin's fear was his preoccupation with ill-health. Allied leaders have reproached Stalin for compelling older men such as Cordell Hull, and sick men such as Roosevelt and Churchill after one of his illnesses, to travel thousands of miles to speak with him instead of meeting them at least half-way. Stalin gave the excuse that his doctors forbade him to travel long distances or by air. He often spoke about his poor health, but never joked about it.

Major instances of Stalin's fear of losing countenance have been recorded by others; it was minor instances of inferiority complex that I observed. Though he would rarely look you in the eye when speaking, I noticed that when photographs were being taken he would jockey for a position on a step higher than anyone else, or ease himself up any slight slope. At Potsdam he insisted childishly that it was his turn to be first to sign the final communiqué.

At Potsdam, Truman produced Army Sergeant Eugene List to play Chopin at a banquet given by the Americans for the British and Soviet delegations. Stalin, not to be outdone, produced a symphony orchestra.

If there was any man among the Russian leaders more colourless in appearance, manner and speech than Stalin, it was Molotov. It was hard to escape the feeling that this was one reason why Stalin found it agreeable to have Molotov around. Furthermore, Molotov stammered, and this meant that by comparison even Stalin's flat speaking voice showed up well.

He liked flattery (this was obvious to any close observer), but he hadn't the Khrushchevian self-confidence to welcome familiarity. I was at the dinner table in Yalta when Roosevelt told Stalin that he and Churchill between them called him "Uncle Joe", and I think Stalin was genuinely piqued.

In June, 1945, Stalin had acquired the supreme military title of generalissimo, and the first time after this I interpreted directly to Stalin was at Potsdam during the audience he gave to Lord Mountbatten. Pavlov indicated to me that he not only expected to be addressed by this title each time, but have it prefixed by *Gospodin* ("Sir"). Stalin had insisted on it. When one had to put "*Gospodin Generalissimus*" into, say, the instrumental case, it became even more

of a tongue-twister, but Stalin enjoyed its use. Stalin, who spoke no language but his native Georgian and Russian, could not bear it when others showed sufficient learning to speak a language other than their own.

He had a basic inferiority complex. He took an obvious pleasure in humiliating, denigrating, or simply scoring off others. I believe that it was this basic inferiority complex that led Stalin to the ultimate irony: that while he claimed (as he told Mountbatten) that he was a man of the people, in reality he isolated himself from the people in order to survive above them.

Only a tiny fraction of Russia's 200 million people ever saw Stalin in the flesh, and most of them only on a remote balcony at Red Square parades. Even fewer knew where he lived and worked. The closest most Soviet citizens got to Stalin was through an ordinary letter-box set in the Kremlin wall and labelled with his current Government or party title—not his name. Here, wretched petitioners hopefully dropped their pathetic pleas for mercy for some relative or loved one being persecuted to keep Stalin alive and in power.

Stalin made his people not only afraid of him, but afraid of one another. When the midnight knock of the secret police was almost as familiar as the postman's, the sick joke in Moscow was of the house concierge knocking at a door in the night and crying, "Don't be afraid, citizens! It's only a fire in the house!"

Sukarno: Creator of Indonesia

An Observer Profile

When a shrieking mob of several thousand Indonesian youths burned and wrecked the British Embassy in Jakarta [in September] and savagely stoned 20 members of its staff, one man alone could with certainty be held to blame, President Sukarno, who has used his mesmeric hold on his country's 100 million people to whip up mass hysteria against the new Federation of Malaysia.

Every so often history throws up a national leader so closely identified with his country that he becomes an accepted stage figure whose histrionic posturings are sanctioned by some tacit international convention. De Gaulle comes to mind, with his preoccupation with *la gloire*. So, however, does Mussolini. Sukarno is such a man. He personifies his country as Churchill typified war-time Britain—though he is no more like Churchill than Bali is like the Isle of Sheppey.

Scattered across 3,000 miles of tropical ocean, from the Indian Ocean to the northern threshold of Australia, the 3,000 palm-fringed

island: the Indonesian Republic lie like pieces of some exotic un-assembled jigsaw puzzle, each with its own magical name—Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Timor, Flores, Moluccas, Bali.

Sukarno, absolute leader of this nation, is a revolutionary with the instincts of a sultan. He wants to be loved, flattered, revered and never opposed. Flamboyant, indefatigable, he is full of theatrical gestures. His favourite costume is a gold-braided uniform with fawn trousers, capped by a black Indonesian fez which conceals his baldness. His large, luminous eyes dominate, even conceal, a flat, slightly puffy face. In repose his full, sensual lips, like B.A.F. wings, droop fastidiously.

His motives for unleashing the outburst against Malaysia are complex but underlying them is the rage of a man whose delusions of grandeur are impeded. Sukarno has dreamed of a Neutralist Indonesian Raja—the restoration of a half-imaginary Javanese empire which would embrace Malaya and the Philippines and dominate South-East Asia. In this context, the anti-Communist Commonwealth Federation of Malaysia, linked to the former colonial Power by a defence treaty, appears as a monstrous geo-political intrusion. But the campaign of "confrontation" will be cunningly calculated blows rather than a flurry of swipes that might invite bloody retaliation.

His methods were well illustrated during his skilful 12-year campaign of diplomatic and economic coercion to browbeat Holland into ceding neighbouring western New Guinea to Indonesia without a fight.

Jakarta approached the United Nations four times, rallied the Afro-Asian bloc and the Soviet camp to Indonesia's cause and tried to shame the Netherlands into submission. All debts to Holland were repudiated. Dutch nationals obliged to leave the republic. Dutch assets worth several hundred million pounds were taken over, and diplomatic relations were severed.

This entire operation bore the stamp of an inglorious tactician who favours anything from deception to blackmail which will break the enemy down and avert the need for frontal assault. Last year Dutch New Guinea duly ceased to exist and on May 1 this year the Indonesian flag rose over the republic's new province—"West Irian".

Throughout his political career, Sukarno has compounded savage bluster with devious compromise in order to win his victories painlessly. He began campaigning against the Dutch for Indonesian independence in 1927 and during the next 15 years was almost continuously in jail or exile. Yet he opposed the wishes of nationalist hotheads and consistently called for a policy of non-violence, of passive non-co-operation with the colonial authority.

During the war he ostensibly collaborated with the Japanese while continuing to work for the future sovereignty of Indonesia. Even after the Japanese surrendered, in August, 1945, Sukarno, conscious of the