

I MET STALIN

The "discovery" of the great Soviet leader. Anna Louise Strong describes the man who leads close to 200,000,000 people. "I found him the easiest person to talk to I ever met."

On December 21 all the free world joined in wishing happy birthday to Joseph Stalin, who was born sixty-three years ago in the little town of Gori in that part of the czarist empire which was formerly the oppressed nation of Georgia. This son of a poor cobbler and a peasant woman, who became head of the first socialist state, is today universally acclaimed as one of the great figures of history whose leadership is written large in the magnificent fight of the Soviet army and people against the Nazi invaders. On this occasion NEW MASSES is publishing by special permission an extract from the chapter on Stalin in Anna Louise Strong's book, The Soviets Expected It.—The Editors.

YEARS AGO, when I first lunched with President Roosevelt just after he had seen H. G. Wells, I found that of all the subjects in the Soviet Union the one that interested him the most was the personality of Stalin and especially the technique of "Stalin's rule." It is a natural interest; I think it interests most Americans. The unbroken rise of Stalin's prestige for twenty years both within the Soviet Union and beyond its borders is really worth attention by students of politics.

Yet most of the American press brags of its ignorance of Stalin by frequently alluding to the "enigmatic ruler in the Kremlin." Cartoons and innuendo have been used to create the legend of a crafty, bloodthirsty dictator who even strives to involve the world in war and chaos so that something called "Bolshevism" may gain. This preposterous legend will shortly die.

Since the German-Soviet war began, Stalin has become chief of the army and government. He will see more foreigners now. He made a good beginning with Harry Hopkins and W. Averill Harriman. They seem to have been impressed! I know how they were impressed for I also met Stalin.

WHEN I met Stalin, I did not find him enigmatic. I found him the easiest person to talk to I ever met. He is far and away the best committee chairman of my experience. He can bring everybody's views out and combine them in the minimum of time. His method of running committees reminded me somewhat of Jane Addams of Hull House or Lillian D. Wald of Henry Street Settlement. They had the same kind of democratically efficient technique, but they used more high pressure than Stalin did.

If Stalin has been inaccessible to foreigners—there were exceptions even to this—that does not mean that he lived in isolation, in a sort of Kremlin ivory tower. There were close to 200,000,000 people keeping,

him busy. He was seeing a lot of them. Not always necessarily the Party leaders. A milkmaid who had broken the milking record, a scientist who had broken the atom, an aviator who flew to America, a coal miner who invented a new labor process, a workman with a housing difficulty, an engineer balked by new conditions—any person representing either a signal achievement or a typical problem might be invited by Stalin to talk it over. That was the way he got his data and kept in touch with the movement of the country.

That, I realized afterward, was why Stalin saw me. For nearly ten years I had liked his country and tried to succeed there, for nearly two I had organized and tried to edit a little weekly newspaper for other Americans who had come to work for the Five Year Plan. And what with censorship, red tape, and what seemed the wanton emergence of another competing weekly, I wanted to give up. A Russian friend suggested that I complain to Stalin. I did. Three days later his office called me up and suggested that I come down and talk it over with "some responsible comrades."

I expected to see some fairly high official at the Party headquarters, and was rather stunned when the auto drove straight to the Kremlin and especially when I entered a large conference room and saw not only Stalin rising to greet me, but Kaganovich and Voroshilov too!

My first impression of him was vaguely disappointing. A stocky figure in a simple suit of khaki color, direct, unassuming, whose first concern was to know whether I understood Russian sufficiently to take part in discussion. Not very imposing for so great a man, I thought. Then we sat down rather casually, and Stalin was not even at the head of the table; Voroshilov was. Stalin took a place where he could see all our faces and started the talk by a pointed question to the man against whom I had complained. After that Stalin seemed to become a sort of background, against which other people's comments went on. The brilliant wit of Kaganovich, the cheerful chuckle of Voroshilov, the characteristics of the lesser people called to consult, all suddenly stood out. I began to understand them all and like them; I even began to understand the editor against whom I had complained. Suddenly I myself was talking and getting my facts out faster and more clearly than I ever did in my life. People seemed to agree with me. Everything got to the point very fast and smoothly, with Stalin saying less than anyone.

Afterward in thinking it over I realized how Stalin's genius for listening helped each of us express ourselves and understand the

others. I recalled his trick of repeating a word of mine either with questioning intonation or a slight emphasis, which suddenly made me feel I had either not quite seen the point or perhaps had overstated it, and so drove me to make it plainer. I recalled how he had done this to others also. Then I understood that his listening had been a dynamic force.

THIS listening habit dates back to the early days of his revolutionary career. "I remember him very well from the early days of our Party," said a veteran Bolshevik to me. "A quiet youth who sat at the edge of the committee, saying almost nothing, but listening very much. Toward the end he would make a few comments, sometimes merely as questions. Gradually we came to see that he always summed up best our joint thinking." The description will be recognized by anyone who ever met Stalin. In any group he is usually last to express his opinion. He does not want to block the full expression of others, as he might easily do by speaking first. Besides this, he is always learning by listening.

"He listens even to the way the grass grows," said a Soviet citizen to me.

On the data thus gathered, Stalin forms conclusions, not "alone in the night," which Emil Ludwig said was Mussolini's way, but in conference and discussion. Even in interviews he seldom receives the interviewer alone; Molotov, Voroshilov, or Kaganovich are likely to be about. Probably he does not even grant an interview without discussing it first with his closest comrades. This is a habit he formed very early. In the days of the underground revolutionary movement, he grew accustomed to close teamwork with comrades who held each other's lives in their hands. In order to survive, they must learn to agree quickly and unanimously, to feel each other's instincts, to guess even at a distance each other's brains.

If I should explain Stalin to politicians, I should call him a superlatively good committeeman. Is this too prosaic a term for the leader of 200,000,000 people? I might call him instead a far-seeing statesman; this also is true. But more important than Stalin's genius is the fact that it is expressed through good committee work. His talent for cooperative action is more significant for the world than the fact that he is great.

Soviet people have a way of putting it which sounds rather odd to Americans. "Stalin does not think individually," they say. It is the exact opposite of the "rugged individualist" ideal. But they mean it as the very highest compliment. They mean that Stalin thinks not only with his own brain



JOSEPH STALIN

drawing by HUGO GELLERT