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Stalin:

The Court of the Red Tsar

Written by Simon Sebag Montefiore

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Stalin

The Court of the Red Tsar

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE



PHOENIX

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Prologue

The Holiday Dinner: 8 November 1932

At around 7 p.m. on 8 November 1932, Nadya Alliluyeva Stalin, aged thirty-one, the oval-faced and brown-eyed wife of the Bolshevik General Secretary, was dressing for the raucous annual party to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the Revolution. Puritanical, earnest but fragile, Nadya prided herself on her 'Bolshevik modesty', wearing the dullest and most shapeless dresses, draped in plain shawls, with square-necked blouses and no make-up. But tonight, she was making a special effort. In the Stalins' gloomy apartment in the two-storey seventeenth-century Poteshny Palace, she twirled for her sister, Anna, in a long, unusually fashionable black dress with red roses embroidered around it, imported from Berlin. For once, she had indulged in a 'stylish hairdo' instead of her usual severe bun. She playfully placed a scarlet tea rose in her black hair.

The party, attended by all the Bolshevik magnates, such as Premier Molotov and his slim, clever and flirtatious wife, Polina, Nadya's best friend, was held annually by the Defence Commissar, Voroshilov: he lived in the long, thin Horse Guards building just five steps across a little lane from the Poteshny. In the tiny, intimate world of the Bolshevik élite, those simple, cheerful soirées usually ended with the potentates and their women dancing Cossack jigs and singing Georgian laments. But that night, the party did not end as usual.

Simultaneously, a few hundred yards to the east, closer to Lenin's Mausoleum and Red Square, in his office on the second floor of the triangular eighteenth-century Yellow Palace, Joseph Stalin, the General Secretary of the Bolshevik Party and the *Vozhd* – the leader – of the Soviet Union, now fifty-three, twenty-two years Nadya's senior, and the father of her two children, was meeting his favoured secret policeman. Genrikh

Yagoda, Deputy Chairman of the GPU,* a ferret-faced Jewish jeweller's son from Nizhny Novgorod with a 'Hitlerish moustache' and a taste for orchids, German pornography and literary friendships, informed Stalin of new plots against him in the Party and more turbulence in the countryside.

Stalin, assisted by Molotov, forty-two, and his economics chief, Valerian Kuibyshev, forty-five, who looked like a mad poet, with wild hair, an enthusiasm for drink, women and, appropriately, writing poetry, ordered the arrest of those who opposed them. The stress of those months was stifling as Stalin feared losing the Ukraine itself which, in parts, had descended into a dystopia of starvation and disorder. When Yagoda left at 7.05 p.m., the others stayed talking about their war to 'break the back' of the peasantry, whatever the cost to the millions starving in history's greatest man-made famine. They were determined to use the grain to finance their gargantuan push to make Russia a modern industrial power. But that night, the tragedy would be closer to home: Stalin was to face a personal crisis that was the most wounding and mysterious of his career. He would replay it over and over again for the rest of his days.

At 8.05 p.m., Stalin, accompanied by the others, ambled down the steps towards the party, through the snowy alleyways and squares of that red-walled medieval fortress, dressed in his Party tunic, baggy old trousers, soft leather boots, old army greatcoat and his wolf *shapka* with earmuffs. His left arm was slightly shorter than the other but much less noticeable than it became in old age – and he was usually smoking a cigarette or puffing on his pipe. The head and the thick, low hair, still black but with specks of the first grey, radiated the graceful strength of the mountain-men of the Caucasus; his almost Oriental, feline eyes were 'honey-coloured' but flashed a lupine yellow in anger. Children found his moustache prickly and his smell of tobacco acrid but, as Molotov and his female admirers recalled, Stalin was still attractive to women with whom he flirted shyly and clumsily.

* The Soviet secret police was first called the Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage, known as the Cheka. In 1922, it became the State Political Administration (GPU) then the United GPU: OGPU. In 1934, it was subsumed into the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD). However, secret policemen were still known as 'Chekists' and the secret police itself as 'the Organs'. In 1941 and 1943, State Security was separated into its own Commissariat, the NKGB. From 1954 to 1991, it became a Committee of State Security, the KGB.

This small, sturdy figure, five feet, six inches tall, who walked ponderously yet briskly with a rough pigeon-toed gait (which was studiously aped by Bolshoi actors when they were playing Tsars), chatting softly to Molotov in his heavy Georgian accent, was only protected by one or two guards. The magnates strolled around Moscow with hardly any security. Even the suspicious Stalin, who was already hated in the countryside, walked home from his Old Square office with just one bodyguard. Molotov and Stalin were walking home one night in a snowstorm 'with no bodyguards' through the Manege Square when they were approached by a beggar. Stalin gave him ten roubles and the disappointed tramp shouted: 'You damned bourgeois!'

'Who can understand our people?' mused Stalin. Despite assassinations of Soviet officials (including an attempt on Lenin in 1918), things were remarkably relaxed until the June 1927 assassination of the Soviet Ambassador to Poland, when there was a slight tightening of security. In 1930, the Politburo passed a decree 'to ban Comrade Stalin from walking around town on foot'. Yet he continued his strolling for a few more years. This was a golden age which, in just a few hours, was to end in death, if not murder.

Stalin was already famous for his Sphinxian inscrutability, and phlegmatic modesty, represented by the pipe he ostentatiously puffed like a peasant elder. Far from being the colourless bureaucratic mediocrity disdained by Trotsky, the real Stalin was an energetic and vainglorious melodramatist who was exceptional in every way.

Beneath the eerie calm of these unfathomable waters were deadly whirlpools of ambition, anger and unhappiness. Capable both of moving with controlled gradualism and of reckless gambles, he seemed enclosed inside a cold suit of steely armour but his antennae were intensely sensitive and his fiery Georgian temper was so uncontrollable that he had almost ruined his career by unleashing it against Lenin's wife. He was a mercurial neurotic with the tense, seething temperament of a highly strung actor who revels in his own drama – what his ultimate successor, Nikita Khrushchev, called a *litsedei*, a man of many faces. Lazar Kaganovich, one of his closest comrades for over thirty years who was also on his way to the dinner, left the best description of this 'unique character': he was a 'different man at different times ... I knew no less than five or six Stalins.'

However, the opening of his archives, and many newly available sources, illuminate him more than ever before: it is no longer enough to describe him as an 'enigma'. We now know how he talked (constantly about himself, often with revealing honesty), how he wrote notes and letters, what he ate, sang and read. Placed in the context of the fissiparous Bolshevik leadership, a unique environment, he becomes a real person. The man inside was a super-intelligent and gifted politician for whom his own historic role was paramount, a nervy intellectual who manically read history and literature, a fidgety hypochondriac suffering from chronic tonsillitis, psoriasis, rheumatic aches from his deformed arm and the iciness of his Siberian exile. Garrulous, sociable and a fine singer, this lonely and unhappy man ruined every love relationship and friendship in his life by sacrificing happiness to political necessity and cannibalistic paranoia. Damaged by his childhood and abnormally cold in temperament, he tried to be a loving father and husband yet poisoned every emotional well, this nostalgic lover of roses and mimosas who believed the solution to every human problem was death, and who was obsessed with executions. This atheist owed everything to priests and saw the world in terms of sin and repentance, yet he was a 'convinced Marxist fanatic from his youth'. His fanaticism was 'semi-Islamic', his Messianic egotism boundless. He assumed the imperial mission of the Russians yet remained very much a Georgian, bringing the vendettas of his forefathers northwards to Muscovy.

Most public men share the Caesarian habit of detaching themselves to admire their own figures on the world stage, but Stalin's detachment was a degree greater. His adopted son Artyom Sergeev remembers Stalin shouting at his son Vasily for exploiting his father's name. 'But I'm a Stalin too,' said Vasily.

'No, you're not,' replied Stalin. 'You're not Stalin and I'm not Stalin. Stalin is Soviet power. Stalin is what he is in the newspapers and the portraits, not you, no not even me!'

He was a self-creation. A man who invents his name, birthday, nationality, education and his entire past, in order to change history and play the role of leader, is likely to end up in a mental institution, unless he embraces, by will, luck and skill, the movement and the moment that can overturn the natural order of things. Stalin was such a man. The movement was the Bolshevik Party; his moment, the decay of the Russian monarchy.

After Stalin's death, it was fashionable to regard him as an aberration but this was to rewrite history as crudely as Stalin did himself. Stalin's success was not an accident. No one alive was more suited to the conspiratorial intrigues, theoretical runes, murderous dogmatism and inhuman sternness of Lenin's Party. It is hard to find a better synthesis between a man and a movement than the ideal marriage between Stalin and Bolshevism: he was a mirror of its virtues and faults.

* * *

Nadya was excited because she was dressing up. Only the day before at the Revolution Day parade, her headaches had been agonizing but today she was cheerful. Just as the real Stalin was different from his historical persona, so was the real Nadezhda Alliluyeva. 'She was very beautiful but you can't see it in photographs,' recalls Artyom Sergeev. She was not conventionally pretty. When she smiled, her eyes radiated honesty and sincerity but she was also po-faced, aloof and troubled by mental and physical illnesses. Her coldness was periodically shattered by attacks of hysteria and depression. She was chronically jealous. Unlike Stalin, who had a hangman's wit, no one recalls Nadya's sense of humour. She was a Bolshevik, quite capable of acting as Stalin's snitch, denouncing enemies to him. So was this the marriage of an ogre and a lamb, a metaphor for Stalin's treatment of Russia itself? Only in so much as it was a Bolshevik marriage in every sense, typical of the peculiar culture that spawned it. Yet in another way, this is simply the commonplace tragedy of a callous workaholic who could not have been a worse partner for his self-centred and unbalanced wife.

Stalin's life appeared to be a perfect fusion of Bolshevik politics and family. Despite the brutal war on the peasants and the increasing pressure on the leaders, this time was a happy idyll, a life of country weekends at peaceful dachas, cheerful dinners in the Kremlin, and languid warm holidays on the Black Sea that Stalin's children would remember as the happiest of their lives. Stalin's letters reveal a difficult but loving marriage:

'Hello, Tatka ... I miss you so much Tatochka – I'm as lonely as a horned owl,' Stalin wrote to Nadya, using his affectionate nickname for her, on 21 June 1930. 'I'm not going out of town on business. I'm just finishing up my work and then I'm going out of town to the children tomorrow ... So goodbye, don't be too long, come home sooner! My kisses! Your Joseph.' Nadya was away

taking treatment for her headaches in Carlsbad, Germany. Stalin missed her and was keeping an eye on the children, like any other husband. On another occasion, she finished her letter:

'I ask you so much to look after yourself! I am kissing you passionately just as you kissed me when we were saying goodbye! Your Nadya.'

It was never an easy relationship. They were both passionate and thin-skinned: their rows were always dramatic. In 1926, she took the children to Leningrad, saying she was leaving him. But he begged her to return and she did. One feels these sorts of rows were frequent but there were intervals of a kind of happiness, though cosiness was too much to hope for in such a Bolshevik household. Stalin was often aggressive and insulting but it was probably his detachment that made him hardest to live with. Nadya was proud and severe but always ailing. If his comrades like Molotov and Kaganovich thought her on the verge of 'madness', her own family admit that she was 'sometimes crazed and oversensitive, all the Alliluyevs had unstable Gypsy blood.' The couple were similarly impossible. Both were selfish, cold with fiery tempers though she had none of his cruelty and duplicity. Perhaps they were too similar to be happy. All the witnesses agree that life with Stalin was 'not easy – it was a hard life.' It was 'not a perfect marriage', Polina Molotova told the Stalins' daughter Svetlana, 'but then what marriage is?'

After 1929, they were often apart since Stalin holidayed in the south during the autumn when Nadya was still studying. Yet the happy times were warm and loving: their letters fly back and forth with secret-police couriers and the notes follow each other in such quick succession that they resemble emails. Even among these ascetic Bolsheviks, there were hints of sex: the 'very passionate kisses' she recalled in her letter quoted above. They loved each other's company: as we have seen, he missed her bitterly when she was away and she missed him too. 'It's very boring without you,' she wrote. 'Come up here and it'll be nice together.'

They shared Vasily and Svetlana. 'Write anything about the children,' wrote Stalin from the Black Sea. When she was away, he reported: 'The children are good. I don't like the teacher, she's running round the place and she lets Vasya and Tolika [their adopted son, Artyom] rush around morning till night. I'm sure Vaska's studies will fail and I want them to succeed in German.' She often enclosed Svetlana's childish notes. They shared their

health worries like any couple. When Stalin was taking the cure at the Matsesta Baths near Sochi, he reported to her: 'I've had two baths and I will have ten ... I think we'll be seriously better.'

'How's your health?' she inquired.

'Had an echo on my lungs and a cough,' he replied. His teeth were a perennial problem:

'Your teeth – please have them treated,' she told him. When she took a cure in Carlsbad, he asked caringly: 'Did you visit the doctors – write their opinions!' He missed her but if the treatment took longer, he understood.

Stalin did not like changing his clothes and wore summer suits into winter so she always worried about him: 'I send you a greatcoat because after the south, you might get a cold.' He sent her presents too: 'I'm sending you some lemons,' he wrote proudly. 'You'll like them.' This keen gardener was to enjoy growing lemons until his death.

They gossiped about the friends and comrades they saw: 'I heard Gorky [the famous novelist] came to Sochi,' she wrote. 'Maybe he's visiting you – what a pity without me. He's so charming to listen to ...' And of course, as a Bolshevik handmaiden living in that minuscule wider family of magnates and their wives, she was almost as obsessed about politics as he was, passing on what Molotov or Voroshilov told her. She sent him books and he thanked her but grumbled when one was missing. She teased him about his appearances in White émigré literature.

The austerely modest Nadya was not afraid of giving orders herself. She scolded her husband's saturnine *chef de cabinet* Poskrebyshev while on holiday, complaining that 'we didn't receive any new foreign literature. But they say there are some new ones. Maybe you will talk to Yagoda [Deputy GPU boss] ... Last time we received such uninteresting books ...' When she returned from the vacation, she sent Stalin the photographs: 'Only the good ones – doesn't Molotov look funny?' He later teased the absurdly stolid Molotov in front of Churchill and Roosevelt. He sent her back his own holiday photographs.

However by the late twenties, Nadya was professionally discontented. She wanted to be a serious Bolshevik career woman in her own right. In the early twenties, she had done typing for her husband, then Lenin and then for Sergo Ordzhonikidze, another energetic and passionate Georgian dynamo now responsible for Heavy Industry. Then she moved to the

International Agrarian Institute in the Department of Agitation and Propaganda where, lost in the archives, we find the daily work of Stalin's wife in all its Bolshevik dreariness: her boss asks his ordinary assistant, who signs herself 'N. Alliluyeva', to arrange the publication of a shockingly tedious article entitled 'We Must Study the Youth Movement in the Village'.

'I have absolutely nothing to do with anyone in Moscow,' she grumbled. 'It's strange though I feel closer to non-Party people – women of course. The reason is they're more easy going ... There are a terrible lot of new prejudices. If you don't work, you're just a *baba*!'* She was right. The new Bolshevik women such as Polina Molotova were politicians in their own right. These feminists scorned housewives and typists like Nadya. But Stalin did not want such a wife for himself: his Nadya would be what he called a *'baba'*. In 1929, Nadya decided to become a powerful Party woman in her own right and did not go on holiday with her husband but remained in Moscow for her examinations to enter the Industrial Academy to study synthetic fibres, hence her loving correspondence with Stalin. Education was one of the great Bolshevik achievements and there were millions like her. Stalin really wanted a *baba* but he supported her enterprise: ironically, his instincts may have been right because it became clear that she was really not strong enough to be a student, mother and Stalin's wife simultaneously. He often signed off:

'How are the exams? Kiss my Tatka!' Molotov's wife became a People's Commissar – and there was every reason for Nadya to hope she would do the same.

* * *

Across the Kremlin, the magnates and their wives converged on Voroshilov's apartment, oblivious of the tragedy about to befall Stalin and Nadya. None of them had far to come. Ever since Lenin had moved the capital to Moscow in 1918, the leaders had lived in this isolated secret world, behind walls thirteen feet thick, crenellated burgundy battlements and towering fortified gates, which, more than anything, resembled a 64-acre theme park of the history of old Muscovy. 'Here Ivan the Terrible used to walk,' Stalin told visitors. He daily passed the Archangel Cathedral

* She certainly cared for Stalin like a good *baba*: 'Stalin has to have a chicken diet,' she wrote to President Kalinin in 1921. 'We've only been allocated 15 chickens ... Please raise the quota since it's only halfway through the month and we've only got 5 left ...'

where Ivan the Terrible lay buried, the Ivan the Great Tower, and the Yellow Palace, where he worked, had been built for Catherine the Great: by 1932, Stalin had lived fourteen years in the Kremlin, as long as he had in his parental home.

These potentates – the 'responsible workers' in Bolshevik terminology – and their staff, the 'service workers', lived in high-ceilinged, roomy apartments once occupied by Tsarist governors and major-domos, mainly in the Poteshny* or Horse Guards, existing so closely in these spired and domed courtyards that they resembled dons living in an Oxford college: Stalin was always popping into their homes and the other leaders regularly turned up at his place for a chat, almost to borrow the proverbial cup of sugar.

Most of the guests only needed to walk along the corridor to get to the second floor apartment of Kliment Voroshilov and his wife Ekaterina in the Horse Guards (nominally the Red Guards Building but no one called it that). Their home was reached through a door in the archway that contained the little cinema where Stalin and his friends often decamped after dinner. Inside it was cosy but spacious, with dark wood-panelled rooms looking out over the Kremlin walls into the city. Voroshilov, their host, aged fifty-two, was the most popular hero in the Bolshevik pantheon – a genial and swaggering cavalryman, once a lathe turner, with an elegant, almost d'Artagnanish moustache, fair hair and cherubic rosy-cheeked face. Stalin would have arrived with the priggish Molotov and the debauched Kuibyshev. Molotov's wife, the dark and formidable Polina, always finely dressed, came from her own flat in the same building. Nadya crossed the lane from the Poteshny with her sister Anna.

In 1932, there would have been no shortage of food and drink but these were the days before Stalin's dinners became imperial banquets. The food – Russian *hors d'oeuvres*, soup, various dishes of salted fish and maybe some lamb – was cooked in the Kremlin canteen and brought hot up to the flat where it was served by a housekeeper, and washed down with vodka and Georgian wine in a parade of toasts. Faced with unparalleled disaster in the regions where ten million people were starving, conspiracy in his Party, uncertain of the loyalty of his own entourage – and with the added strain of a troubled wife, Stalin felt beleaguered and at war.

* The Poteshny Palace, where the Stalins lived, means 'Amusement Palace' since it once housed actors and a theatre maintained by the Tsars.

Like the others at the centre of this whirlwind, he needed to drink and unwind. Stalin sat in the middle of the table, never at the head, and Nadya sat opposite him.

* * *

During the week, the Stalin household was based in the Kremlin apartment. The Stalins had two children, Vasily, eleven, a diminutive, stubborn and nervous boy, and Svetlana, seven, a freckly red-haired girl. Then there was Yakov, now twenty-five, son of Stalin's first marriage, who had joined his father in 1921, having been brought up in Georgia, a shy, dark boy with handsome eyes. Stalin found Yakov irritatingly slow. When he was eighteen, he had fallen in love with, and married, Zoya, a priest's daughter. Stalin did not approve because he wanted Yasha to study. In a 'cry for help', Yasha shot himself but only grazed his chest. Stalin regarded this 'as blackmail'. The stern Nadya disapproved of Yasha's self-indulgence: 'she was so appalled by Yasha,' Stalin mused. But he was even less sympathetic.

'Couldn't even shoot straight,' he quipped cruelly. 'This was his military humour,' explains Svetlana. Yasha later divorced Zoya, and came home.

Stalin had high, and given his own meteoric success, unfair expectations of the sons – but he adored his daughter. In addition to these three, there was Artyom Sergeev, Stalin's beloved adopted son, who was often in their house, even though his mother was still alive.* Stalin was more indulgent than Nadya, even though he smacked Vasily 'a couple of times'. Indeed, this woman portrayed as angelic in every history was, in her way, even more self-centred than Stalin. Her own family regarded her as 'utterly self-indulgent', recalls her nephew Vladimir Redens. 'The nanny complained that Nadya was not remotely interested in the children.' Her daughter Svetlana agreed that she was much more committed to her studies. She treated the children sternly and never gave Svetlana a 'word of praise'. It is surprising that she rowed most with Stalin, not about his evil policies, but about his spoiling the children!

* One of the few attractive traditions of Bolshevism was the adoption of the children of fallen heroes and ordinary orphans. Stalin adopted Artyom when his father, a famous revolutionary, was killed in 1921 and his mother was ill. Similarly Mikoyan adopted the sons of Sergei Shaumian, the hero of Baku; Voroshilov adopted the son of Mikhail Frunze, the War Commissar who died suspiciously in 1925. Later both Kaganovich and Yezhov, harsh men indeed, adopted orphans.

Yet it is harsh to blame her for this. Her medical report, preserved by Stalin in his archive, and the testimonies of those who knew her, confirm that Nadya suffered from a serious mental illness, perhaps hereditary manic depression or borderline personality disorder though her daughter called it 'schizophrenia', and a disease of the skull that gave her migraines. She needed special rest cures in 1922 and 1923 as she experienced 'drowsiness and weakness'. She had had an abortion in 1926 which, her daughter revealed, had caused 'female problems'. Afterwards she had no periods for months on end. In 1927, doctors discovered her heart had a defective valve – and she suffered from exhaustion, angina and arthritis. In 1930, the angina struck again. Her tonsils had recently been taken out. The trip to Carlsbad did not cure her mysterious headaches.

She did not lack for medical care – the Bolsheviks were as obsessively hypochondriacal as they were fanatically political. Nadya was treated by the best doctors in Russia and Germany. But these were not psychiatrists: it is hard to imagine a worse environment for a fragile girl than the cruel aridity of this Kremlin pressure-cooker pervaded by the martial Bolshevism that she so worshipped – and the angry thoughtlessness of Stalin whom she so revered.

She was married to a demanding egotist incapable of giving her, or probably anyone, happiness: his relentless energy seemed to suck her dry. But she was also patently the wrong person for him. She did not soothe his stress – she added to it. He admitted he was baffled by Nadya's mental crises. He simply did not possess the emotional resources to help her. Sometimes her 'schizophrenia' was so grievous, 'she was almost deranged'. The magnates, and the Alliluyevs themselves, sympathized with Stalin. Yet, despite their turbulent marriage and their strange similarity of passion and jealousy, they loved each other after their own fashion.

After all, it was Stalin for whom Nadya was dressing up. The 'black dress with rose pattern appliqué ...' had been bought as a present for her by her brother, slim brown-eyed Pavel Alliluyev who had just returned with his usual treasure chest of gifts from Berlin, where he worked for the Red Army. With Nadya's proud Gypsy, Georgian, Russian and German blood, the rose looked striking against her jet-black hair. Stalin would be surprised because, as her nephew put it, he 'never encouraged her to dress more glamorously'.

* * *

The drinking at dinner was heavy, regulated by a *tamada* (Georgian toastmaster). This was probably one of the Georgians such as the flamboyant Grigory Ordzhonikidze, always known as Sergo, who resembled 'a Georgian prince' with his mane of long hair and leonine face. Some time during the evening, without any of the other revellers noticing, Stalin and Nadya became angry with one another. This was hardly a rare occurrence. Her evening began to crumble when, among all the toasts, dancing and flirting at table, Stalin barely noticed how she had dressed up, even though she was one of the youngest women present. This was certainly ill-mannered but not uncommon in many marriages.

They were surrounded by the other Bolshevik magnates, all hardened by years in the underground, blood-spattered by their exploits in the Civil War, and now exultant if battered by the industrial triumphs and rural struggles of the Stalin Revolution. Some, like Stalin, were in their fifties. But most were strapping, energetic fanatics in their late thirties, some of the most dynamic administrators the world has ever seen, capable of building towns and factories against all odds, but also of slaughtering their enemies and waging war on their own peasants. In their tunics and boots, they were macho, hard-drinking, powerful and famous across the Imperium, stars with blazing egos, colossal responsibilities, and Mausers in their holsters. The boisterous, booming and handsome Jewish cobbler, Lazar Kaganovich, Stalin's Deputy, had just returned from presiding over mass-executions and deportations in the North Caucasus. Then there was the swaggering Cossack commander Budyonny with his luxuriant walrus moustaches and the dazzling white teeth, and the slim, shrewd and dapper Armenian Mikoyan, all veterans of brutal expeditions to raise grain and crush the peasants. These were voluble, violent and colourful political showmen.

They were an incestuous family, a web of long friendships and enduring hatreds, shared love affairs, Siberian exiles and Civil War exploits: Mikhail Kalinin, the President, had been visiting the Alliluyevs since 1900. Nadya knew Voroshilov's wife from Tsaritsyn (later Stalingrad) and she studied at the Industrial Academy with Maria Kaganovich and Dora Khazan (wife of another magnate, Andreyev, also present), her best friends along with Polina Molotova. Finally there was the small intellectual Nikolai Bukharin, all twinkling eyes and reddish beard, a painter, poet

and philosopher whom Lenin had once called the 'darling of the Party' and who had been Stalin and Nadya's closest friend. He was a charmer, the Puck of the Bolsheviks. Stalin had defeated him in 1929 but he remained friends with Nadya. Stalin himself half-loved and half-hated 'Bukharchik' in that deadly combination of admiration and envy that was habitual to him. That night, Bukharin was readmitted, at least temporarily, to the magic circle.

Irritated by Stalin's lack of attention, Nadya started dancing with her louche, sandy-haired Georgian godfather, 'Uncle Abel' Yenukidze, the official in charge of the Kremlin who was already shocking the Party with his affairs with teenage ballerinas. 'Uncle Abel's' fate would illustrate the deadly snares of hedonism when private life belonged to the Party. Perhaps Nadya was trying to make Stalin angry. Natalya Rykova, who was in the Kremlin that night with her father, the former Premier, but not at the dinner, heard the next day that Nadya's dancing infuriated Stalin. The story is certainly credible because other accounts mention her flirting with someone. Perhaps Stalin was so drunk, he did not even notice.

* * *

Stalin was busy with his own flirtation. Even though Nadya was opposite him, he flirted shamelessly with the 'beautiful' wife of Alexander Yegorov, a Red Army commander with whom he had served in the Polish War of 1920. Galya Yegorova, née Zekrovskaya, thirty-four, was a brash film actress, a 'pretty, interesting and charming' brunette well known for her affairs and risqué dresses. Among those drab Bolshevik matrons, Yegorova must have been like a peacock in a farmyard for, as she herself admitted in her later interrogation, she moved in a world of 'dazzling company, stylish clothes ... flirtatiousness, dancing and fun'. Stalin's style of flirting alternated between traditional Georgian chivalry and, when drunk, puerile boorishness. On this occasion, the latter triumphed. Stalin always entertained children by throwing biscuits, orange peel and bits of bread into plates of ice-cream or cups of tea. He flirted with the actress in the same way, lobbing breadballs at her. His courtship of Yegorova made Nadya manically jealous: she could not tolerate it.

Stalin was no womanizer: he was married to Bolshevism and emotionally committed to his own drama in the cause of Revolution. Any private emotions were bagatelles compared to the betterment of mankind through Marxism-Leninism. But even

if they were low on his list of priorities, even if he was emotionally damaged, he was not uninterested in women – and women were definitely interested in him, even 'enamoured' according to Molotov. One of his entourage later said that Stalin complained that the Alliluyev women 'would not leave him alone' because 'they all wanted to go to bed with him'. There was some truth in this.

Whether they were the wives of comrades, relations or servants, women buzzed around him like amorous bees. His newly opened archives reveal how he was bombarded with fan letters not unlike those received by modern pop stars. 'Dear Comrade Stalin ... I saw you in my dreams ... I have hopes of an audience ...' writes a provincial teacher, adding hopefully like a starry-eyed groupie: 'I enclose my photograph ...' Stalin replied playfully if negatively:

'Comrade Unfamiliar! I ask you to trust that I have no wish to disappoint you and I'm ready to respect your letter but I have to say I have no appointment (no time!) to satisfy your wish. I wish you all the best. J Stalin. PS Your letter and photograph returned.' But sometimes he must have told Poskrebyshev that he would be happy to meet his admirers. This gels with the story of Ekaterina Mikulina, an attractive, ambitious girl of twenty-three who wrote a treatise, 'Socialist Competition of Working People', which she sent to Stalin, admitting it was full of mistakes and asking for his help. He invited her to visit him on 10 May 1929. He liked her and it was said she stayed the night at the dacha in Nadya's absence.* She received no benefits from this short liaison other than the honour of his writing her preface.

Certainly, Nadya, who knew him best, suspected him of having affairs and she had every reason to know. His bodyguard Vlasik confirmed to his daughter that Stalin was so besieged with offers that he could not resist everyone: 'he was a man after all,' behaving with the seigneurial sensuality of a traditional Georgian husband. Nadya's jealousy was sometimes manic, sometimes indulgent: in her letters, she lovingly teased him about his female admirers as if she was proud of being married to such a great man. But at the theatre, she had recently ruined the evening by throwing a tantrum when he flirted with a ballerina. Most recently, there was the female hairdresser in the Kremlin with

* She later became director of a gramophone factory from which she was sacked many years later for taking bribes. She lived until 1998 but never spoke about her short friendship with Stalin.

whom Stalin was evidently conducting some sort of dalliance. If he had merely visited the barber's shop like the other leaders, this anonymous girl would not have become such an issue. Yet Molotov remembered the hairdresser fifty years later.

Stalin had had his share of affairs within the Party. His relationships were as short as his spells in exile. Most of the girlfriends were fellow revolutionaries or their wives. Molotov was impressed by Stalin's 'success' with women: when, just before the Revolution, Stalin stole a girlfriend named Marusya from Molotov, the latter put it down to his 'beautiful dark brown eyes', though luring a girlfriend away from this plodder hardly qualifies Stalin as a Casanova. Kaganovich confirmed that Stalin enjoyed affairs with several comrades including the 'plump, pretty' Ludmilla Stal.* One source mentions an earlier affair with Nadya's friend Dora Khazan. Stalin may have benefited from revolutionary sexual freedom, even in his diffident way, enjoying some success with the girls who worked on the Central Committee secretariat, but he remained a traditional Caucasian. He favoured liaisons with discreet GPU staff: the hairdresser fitted the bill.

As so often with jealousy, Nadya's manic tantrums and bouts of depression encouraged the very thing she dreaded. All of these things – her illness, disappointment about her dress, politics, jealousy and Stalin's oafishness – came together that night.

* * *

Stalin was unbearably rude to Nadya but historians, in their determination to show his monstrosity, have ignored how unbearably rude she was to him. This 'peppery woman', as Stalin's security chief, Pauker, described her, frequently shouted at Stalin in public which was why her own mother thought her a 'fool'. The cavalryman Budyonny, who was at the dinner, remembered how she was 'always nagging and humiliating' Stalin. 'I don't know how he puts up with it,' Budyonny confided in his wife. By now her depression had become so bad that she confided in a friend that she was sick of 'everything, even the children'.

The lack of interest of a mother in her own children is a flashing danger signal if ever there was one, but there was no one to act on

* Another of his sweethearts was a young Party activist, Tatiana Slavotinskaya. The warmth of his love-letters from exile increased in proportion to his material needs: 'Dearest darling Tatiana Alexandrovna,' he wrote in December 1913, 'I received your parcel but you really didn't need to buy new undergarments ... I don't know how to repay you, my darling sweetheart!'

it. Stalin was not the only one puzzled by her. Few of this rough-hewn circle, including Party women like Polina Molotova, understood that Nadya was probably suffering from clinical depression: 'she couldn't control herself,' said Molotov. She desperately needed sympathy. Polina Molotova admitted the *Vozhd* was 'rough' with Nadya. Their roller-coaster continued. One moment, she was leaving Stalin, the next they loved each other again.

At the dinner, some accounts claim, it was a political toast that inflamed her. Stalin toasted the destruction of the Enemies of the State and noticed Nadya had not raised her glass.

'Why aren't you drinking?' he called over truculently, aware that she and Bukharin shared a disapproval of his starvation of the peasantry. She ignored him. To get her attention, Stalin tossed orange peel and flicked cigarettes at her, but this outraged her. When she became angrier and angrier, he called over, 'Hey you! Have a drink!'

'My name isn't "hey"!' she retorted. Furiously rising from the table, she stormed out. It was probably now that Budyonny heard her shout at Stalin: 'Shut up! Shut up!'

Stalin shook his head in the ensuing silence:

'What a fool!' he muttered, boozily not understanding how upset she was. Budyonny must have been one of the many there who sympathized with Stalin.

'I wouldn't let my wife talk to me like that!' declared the Cossack bravo who may not have been the best adviser since his own first wife had committed suicide or at least died accidentally while playing with his pistol.

Someone had to follow her out. She was the leader's wife so the deputy leader's wife had to look after her. Polina Molotova pulled on her coat and followed Nadya outside. They walked round and round the Kremlin, as others were to do in times of crisis. Nadya complained to Polina,

'He grumbles all the time ... and why did he have to flirt like that?' She talked about the 'business with the hairdresser' and Yegorova at the dinner. The women decided, as women do, that he was drunk, playing the fool. But Polina, devoted to the Party, also criticized her friend, saying 'it was wrong of her to abandon Stalin at such a difficult time'. Perhaps Polina's *'Partiinost'* – Partymindedness – made Nadya feel even more isolated.

'She quietened down,' recalled Polina, 'and talked about the

Academy and her chances of starting work ... When she seemed perfectly calm', in the early hours, they said goodnight. She left Nadya at the Poteshny Palace and crossed the lane, home to the Horse Guards.

Nadya went to her room, dropping the tea rose from her hair at the door. The dining room, with a special table for Stalin's array of government telephones, was the main room there. Two halls led off it. To the right was Stalin's office and small bedroom where he slept either on a military cot or a divan, the habits of an itinerant revolutionary. Stalin's late hours and Nadya's strict attendance at the Academy meant they had separate rooms. Carolina Til, the housekeeper, the nannies and the servants were further down this corridor. The left corridor led to Nadya's tiny bedroom where the bed was draped in her favourite shawls. The windows opened on to the fragrant roses of the Alexandrovsky Gardens.

* * *

Stalin's movements in the next two hours are a mystery: did he return home? The party continued *chez* Voroshilov. But the bodyguard Vlasik told Khrushchev (who was not at the dinner) that Stalin left for a rendezvous at his Zubalovo dacha with a woman named Guseva, the wife of an officer, described by Mikoyan, who appreciated feminine aesthetics, as 'very beautiful'. Some of these country houses were just fifteen minutes' drive from the Kremlin. If he did go, it is possible he took some boon companions with him when the women went to bed. Voroshilov's wife was famously jealous of her husband. Molotov and President Kalinin, an old roué, were mentioned afterwards to Bukharin by Stalin himself. Certainly Vlasik would have gone with Stalin in the car. When Stalin did not come home, Nadya is said to have called the dacha.

'Is Stalin there?'

'Yes,' replied an 'inexperienced fool' of a security guard.

'Who's with him?'

'Gusev's wife.'

This version may explain Nadya's sudden desperation. However, a resurgence of her migraine, a wave of depression or just the sepulchral solitude of Stalin's grim apartment in the early hours, are also feasible. There are holes in the story too: Molotov, the nanny, and Stalin's granddaughter, among others, insisted that Stalin slept at home in the apartment. Stalin certainly would

not have entertained women in his Zubalovo dacha because we know his children were there. But there were plenty of other dachas. More importantly, no one has managed to identify this Guseva, though there were several army officers of that name. Moreover Mikoyan never mentioned this to his children or in his own memoirs. Prim Molotov may have been protecting Stalin in his conversations in old age – he lied about many other matters, as did Khrushchev, dictating his reminiscences in his dotage. It seems more likely that if this woman was the 'beautiful' wife of a soldier, it was Yegorova who was actually at the party and whose flirting caused the row in the first place.

We will never know the truth but there is no contradiction between these accounts: Stalin probably did go drinking at a dacha with some fellow carousers, maybe Yegorova, and he certainly returned to the apartment in the early hours. The fates of these magnates and their women would soon depend on their relationship with Stalin. Many of them would die terrible deaths within five years. Stalin never forgot the part they each played that November night.

* * *

Nadya looked at one of the many presents that her genial brother Pavel had brought back from Berlin along with the black embroidered dress she was still wearing. This was a present she had requested because, as she told her brother, 'sometimes it's so scary and lonely in the Kremlin with just one soldier on duty'. It was an exquisite lady's pistol in an elegant leather holster. This is always described as a Walther but in fact it was a Mauser. It is little known that Pavel also brought an identical pistol as a present for Polina Molotova but pistols were not hard to come by in that circle.

Whenever Stalin came home, he did not check his wife but simply went to bed in his own bedroom on the other side of the apartment.

Some say Nadya bolted the bedroom door. She began to write a letter to Stalin, 'a terrible letter', thought her daughter Svetlana. In the small hours, somewhere between 2 and 3 a.m. when she had finished it, she lay on the bed.

* * *

The household rose as normal. Stalin always lay in until about eleven. No one knew when he had come home and whether he had encountered Nadya. It was late when Carolina Til tried

Nadya's door and perhaps forced it open. 'Shaking with fright', she found her mistress's body on the floor by the bed in a pool of blood. The pistol was beside her. She was already cold. The housekeeper rushed to get the nanny. They returned and laid the body on the bed before debating what to do. Why did they not waken Stalin? 'Little people' have a very reasonable aversion to breaking bad news to their Tsars. 'Faint with fear', they telephoned the security boss Pauker, then 'Uncle' Abel Yenukidze, Nadya's last dancing partner, the politician in charge of the Kremlin, and Polina Molotova, the last person to see her alive. Yenukidze, who lived in Horse Guards like the others, arrived first – he alone of the leaders viewed the pristine scene, a knowledge for which he would pay dearly. Molotov and Voroshilov arrived minutes later.

One can only imagine the frantic uproar in the apartment as the oblivious ruler of Russia slept off his drink down one corridor while his wife slept eternally down the other. They also called Nadya's family – her brother Pavel, who lived across the river in the new House on the Embankment, and parents, Sergei and Olga Alliluyev. Someone called the family's personal doctor who in turn summoned the well-known Professor Kushner.

Peering at her later, this disparate group of magnates, family and servants, searching for reasons for this act of despair and betrayal, found the angry letter she left behind. No one knows what it contained – or whether it was destroyed by Stalin or someone else. But Stalin's bodyguard, Vlasik, later revealed that something else was found in her bedroom: a copy of the damaging anti-Stalinist 'Platform', written by Riutin, an Old Bolshevik who was now under arrest. This might be significant or it might mean nothing. All the leaders then read opposition and émigré journals so perhaps Nadya was reading Stalin's copy. In her letters to Stalin, she reported what she had read in the White press 'about you! Are you interested?' None the less, during those days in the country at large, the mere possession of this document warranted arrest.

No one knew what to do. They gathered in the dining room, whispering: should they wake up Stalin? Who would tell the *Vozhd*? How had she died? Suddenly Stalin himself walked into the room. Someone, most likely it was Yenukidze, Stalin's old friend who judging by the archives had assumed responsibility, stepped forward and said:

'Joseph, Nadezhda Sergeevna is no longer with us. Joseph, Joseph, Nadya's dead.'

Stalin was poleaxed. This supremely political creature, with an inhuman disregard for the millions of starving women and children in his own country, displayed more humanity in the next few days than he would at any other time in his life. Olga, Nadya's mother, an elegant lady of independent spirit who had known Stalin so long and always regretted her daughter's behaviour, hurried into the dining room where a broken Stalin was still absorbing the news. Doctors had arrived and they offered the heartbroken mother some valerian drops, the valium of the thirties, but she could not drink them. Stalin staggered towards her:

'I'll drink them,' he said. He downed the whole dose. He saw the body and the letter which, wrote Svetlana, shocked and wounded him grievously.

Nadya's brother, Pavel, arrived with his dimpled sunny wife Yevgenia, known to all as Zhenya, who would herself play a secret role in Stalin's life – and suffer for it. They were shocked not only by the death of a sister but by the sight of Stalin himself.

'She's crippled me,' he said. They had never seen him so soft, so vulnerable. He wept, saying something like this lament of many years later: 'Oh Nadya, Nadya ... how we needed you, me and the children!' The rumours of murder started immediately. Had Stalin returned to the apartment and shot her in a row? Or had he insulted her again and gone to bed, leaving her to kill herself? But the tragedy raised greater questions too: until that night, the existence of the magnates was a 'wonderful life', as described by Ekaterina Voroshilova in her diary. That night, it ended for ever. 'How,' she asks, 'did our life in the Party become so complex, it was incomprehensible to the point of agony?' The 'agony' was just beginning. The suicide 'altered history,' claims the Stalins' nephew, Leonid Redens. 'It made the Terror inevitable.' Naturally Nadya's family exaggerate the significance of her death: Stalin's vindictive, paranoid and damaged character was already formed long before. The Terror itself was the result of vast political, economic and diplomatic forces – but Stalin's personality certainly shaped it. Nadya's death created one of the rare moments of doubt in a life of iron self-belief and dogmatic certainty. How did Stalin recover and what was the effect of this humiliation on him, his entourage – and Russia itself? Did

vengeance for this personal fiasco play its part in the coming Terror when some of the guests that night would liquidate the others?

Stalin suddenly picked up Nadya's pistol and weighed it in his hands: 'It was a toy,' he told Molotov, adding strangely, 'It was only fired once a year!'

The man of steel 'was in a shambles, knocked sideways', exploding in 'sporadic fits of rage', blaming anyone else, even the books she was reading, before subsiding into despair. Then he declared that he resigned from power. He too was going to kill himself:

'I can't go on living like this ...'