

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 275

“Stalin Is the Lenin of Today”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

As Joseph Stalin rose to prominence as the most important political leader in the new Soviet Union, he carefully cultivated his image as Lenin’s most ardent and supportive follower, and therefore the one best suited to lead the USSR forward after Lenin himself was gone.

This claim was best summed up in a popular slogan of the time, one in which Stalin himself took great delight: “Stalin is the Lenin of today.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 275. Stalin Is the Lenin of Today.

The last time we looked at the Soviet Union, all the way back in episode 235, we saw how in the five years following Lenin’s death, Joseph Stalin gradually emerged at the most powerful figure in the new Soviet state. Stalin positioned himself politically as Lenin’s closest and most loyal supporter even as he undid Lenin’s New Economic Policy and re-imposed a more centralized command economy under the First Five-Year Plan.

The First Five-Year Plan and its follow-up, the Second Five-Year Plan, produced impressive gains in industrial production, Stalin’s highest priority, though they also produced widespread famine and starvation in rural regions.

But the Revolution was about more than politics and economics. The Revolution was also meant to reshape society, by purging it of the poisons of nationalism and religion and replacing them with education and enlightenment.

One of the great successes of the era was in education. The new Soviet state built and staffed large numbers of new schools, not only in the cities, but across the nation, even into the most remote corners of Siberia and central Asia. At the beginning of the twentieth century, only about a third of the adult male population of the Russian Empire was literate. By 1939, that number was above 90%. By then, *Pravda* and *Izvestia* were each selling tens of millions of copies every day, at a price of ten kopeks, which anyone could afford. There were magazines of arts and

culture. Books were sold so cheaply, they were practically giving them away. It made no sense economically, but it was good for society, and under socialism, that's what matters. Profit is no longer the be-all and end-all of human activity.

And because socialism eschews narrow nationalism, schools taught non-Russian students in their native languages, although the Soviet Union gradually acquired an eccentric version of Russian nationalism, under which it was considered perfectly proper to take pride in the accomplishments of, say Peter the Great, so long as you didn't praise any of the last few Emperors or anything about their reigns. The Cyrillic alphabet was the go-to alphabet. Uzbeks, for example, were discouraged from writing their language in Arabic script, as was done before the Revolution. A system for writing Uzbek first in Roman letters, and later in Cyrillic letters, was encouraged instead.

The Soviet state invested in facilities for leisure and recreation. Sports and athletic competitions were publicly funded and workers encouraged to attend, both as participants and spectators. In particular, soccer, ice hockey, and gymnastics soared in popularity. Libraries and reading rooms popped up everywhere. Every town of any size had a theatre where plays were performed and concerts held. The old Imperial Ballet, which was almost shut down as an artifact of the bad old days, was revived as the Soviet Ballet, even if most of Imperial Russia's most prominent dancers and choreographers had fled the Revolution for France, Britain, or the US.

The Soviet telephone network spread across the nation's vastness. Radio became the most popular medium of mass communication, and motion pictures the most popular form of entertainment. Public parks sprang up across the country, including a 300-acre trash dump in Moscow that was cleaned up and repurposed as the Central Park of Culture and Leisure. A few years later it would be renamed after the Russian novelist Maxim Gorky and become commonly known as Gorky Park. And public spaces weren't only for the surface. Underground, in the Moscow Metro, glorious subway stations were built with marble floors and breathtaking chandeliers. Appointments that in the old days would have gone into Grand Ducal palaces now went into public spaces to be enjoyed by the masses.

That in fact was the attitude toward art in general in the new Soviet Union. Russia had a vibrant community of visual artists, as we saw back in episode 44, when we met the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, who brought Russian art to exhibitions in Paris. Russian artists had already embraced the Futurist movement, which originated in Italy, and Cubism, which originated in Paris among artists like Pablo Picasso, see episode 34. These modern art movements, with their emphases on movement, machinery, and the artifacts of modern life, meshed well with the new Communist society.

The October Revolution excited artists, and, apart from the substance of their work, they embraced the principle that artists, like the proletariat, were to be liberated from the chains of capitalists and aristocrats. No longer would artists be forced to appease the tastes of stuffy titled

aristocrats and crass, grubby plutocrats in order to earn the income they needed to produce their work. Artists would now be paid by the state to produce work for the masses.

Under imperialism and capitalism, paintings hung in gilded frames in the salons of the rich and in dusty museums, like monks secluded in monasteries. In the new socialist society, art would not exist within in isolated spaces meant as refuges from the everyday world to be enjoyed by a select few. No, socialist art would go out into the world and become part of the daily life of the people. Visual art would not merely be paintings on canvas, but on posters and in graphic designs in public spaces.

These principles led to an artistic movement called constructivism, which sought to integrate art into the modern world, not as mere decoration, but as part of public life. As one Russian artist put it, “the streets [are] our brushes, the squares our palettes.” And yes, that included political propaganda to explain and popularize Communism for the masses. Some of the most interesting art of this period came in the form of political posters.

These principles were not limited to paintings and graphic arts. The Revolution was celebrated in mass theatrical events, including outdoor recreations of historic moments like the storming of the Winter Palace, in which the spectators themselves participated, playacting as the heroes of socialism. Filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein and his landmark film *Battleship Potemkin*, which we already talked about, played a similar role.

But the epitome of Soviet Constructivism has got to be Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*, unveiled in 1919, which was a design for a structure almost as tall as the Empire State Building, a steel structure supporting a double helix tipped to one side. Imagine the love child of the Eiffel Tower and the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Inside the steel framework would be suspended glass buildings, a cube that rotated once per year, which would provide space for meetings and conferences, above that a cone that would rotate once per month, which would house offices, and on top a cylinder that would contain an information center and rotate once per day. It was meant to eclipse the Eiffel Tower as a modern wonder, built, as one critic put it, “of steel, glass, and revolution.”

Alas, it was also completely impractical, and was never built. The Russia of 1919, facing civil war, international isolation, and mass starvation, was in no position to attempt to build such an ambitious structure.

Indeed, the poverty of Russia at this time is the most important reason we don’t see more examples of these early Soviet arts. Russia’s two most important painters both lived in France at the time of the Revolution. I refer to the 52-year old Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky and the 32-year old Jewish Belarusian painter Moishe Shagal, known in the West as Marc Chagall. Both of them returned to Russia and immersed themselves in the intellectual and artistic ferment of the times, although, sadly for Russia, the dreadful state of the economy meant there was a whole lot

of ferment but not enough art, and in 1922, Kandinsky went to Germany, where he became involved in the Bauhaus, while Chagall returned to Paris in 1923.

By the 1930s, with the Soviet economy growing stronger, but also with Stalin ruling with an increasingly heavy hand, the approved art form of the USSR became Socialist Realism, a sort of idealized realism. We'll talk about that sometime down the road.

Remember George Bernard Shaw, the Irish-British playwright and socialist, whom we've encountered a few times in the podcast? In 1920, Pope Benedict XV canonized Joan of Arc, which led to a wave of interest in her story and many new works of art about her. Shaw wrote a play, *Saint Joan*, produced in 1923, one of his most famous works, which no doubt played a role in his being awarded the 1925 Nobel Prize for Literature.

Shaw was an admirer of the Russian Revolution, and after turning down several invitations, finally visited the USSR in 1931, where he undertook a carefully managed tour, leading up to a meeting with Stalin himself. Shaw returned to Britain overflowing with praise for Stalin and the Soviet Union. He mocked claims of starvation and political terror, dismissing them as lies and slanders. We now know those claims were absolutely correct.

Similarly, the Anglo-American journalist Walter Duranty, who lived in Moscow for some time, wrote dispatches for the *New York Times* in 1931, in which he acknowledged an authoritarianism in the Soviet Union but defended it as necessary; compatible culturally with Russian values and beneficial to the Russian people. Duranty's reporting on the Soviet Union won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1932 and is credited with helping encourage the US government to finally open diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1933, and with the UK reopening them after previously breaking them off. The USSR joined the League of Nations in 1934.

[music: Khachaturian, *Sabre Dance*]

The Soviet Union by the early 1930s was a country where some very good things were happening and some terrible things were happening, led by a government that was remarkably adept at showcasing the good things and equally adept at hiding the terrible things. This is the country that invented the Potemkin village, after all.

Even many committed Communists shared this feeling of being impressed by the state's accomplishments while appalled by the costs. After the First Five-Year Plan was completed, successfully according to the official line, it was time to develop the second one. In January 1933, Stalin told the Central Committee that he was done "whipping the country," as he put it. Many in attendance no doubt breathed a sigh of relief.

Stalin was not done whipping the country. Two months earlier, in November 1932, Stalin's wife, Nadezhda, killed herself after a quarrel with him over his flirting with other women. The suicide was covered up and everyone told that she had died of acute appendicitis. Even the couple's two

children, 11-year-old Vasily and six-year-old Svetlana, did not learn the truth until after the death of their father in 1953.

Stalin never was a warm and friendly fellow, but the death of his wife left him colder still. He encouraged a cult of personality built around himself. His image appeared everywhere, often paired with Lenin, lest anyone miss the point. He was idolized by the young party faithful, and he enjoyed the adulation. During the years he led the Soviet Union, he was easily as popular as Lenin ever was, with perhaps millions of devoted followers. Even skeptics of Stalin's leadership had to admire his ability to mobilize large numbers of people and get big projects done.

But he also understood the need to set limits on himself. He maintained an ordinary appearance, dressed in plain clothes, and publicly turned down some honors in order to maintain an image of humility, such as in 1938, when a group of Party loyalists proposed renaming Moscow Stalinodar and he rejected the suggestion.

Communism is officially atheistic and dismisses traditional religion as a capitalist gimmick. Violence and confiscations were directed against churches during the Civil War, but the period of the New Economic Policy brought with it an unofficial look-the-other-way policy toward religious organizations. That changed dramatically, beginning with the First Five-Year Plan. Large numbers of Russian Orthodox clergy were arrested or killed or went into hiding; the total number in the country shrank from 60,000 to less than 6,000 during this period. This persecution of religion was ecumenical. Other Christian clergy were also targeted, as were both Sunni and Shi'ite mullahs and Jewish rabbis. By 1939, only about 3% of the nation's churches were still open; in Moscow, the grand Cathedral of Christ the Savior was demolished in 1931 to make room for a proposed Palace of the Soviets, which was intended to become the world's tallest building with a statue of Lenin on top, though that project also was never completed.

Women had played an important role in fomenting the Revolution and women got expanded rights under the new Soviet system. Many of these new rights related to employment, and under Communist rule more women worked outside the home. Marriage law was taken over by the state. Women had the right to divorce and to paid maternity leave. The Soviet Union became the first European nation to legalize abortion.

Pre-revolutionary laws criminalizing homosexuality were also repealed after the Revolution, and the 1920s was a time of legal, if not always social, tolerance for same-sex relationships. Under Stalin though, and despite the state's hostility to religion, the 1930s saw a rollback, with abortion criminalized again in 1936, ostensibly to encourage population growth. Same-sex relations were re-criminalized in 1934, though only between men. It is likely that at least part of the motivation for that change was that prosecutions for homosexuality were a useful tool to use against political dissidents. Surprisingly, for a state that was officially anti-religion, the Soviet Union would remain relatively strict and traditional in its attitude toward sex and sexuality, even as Western societies became increasingly liberal.

On August 31, 1935, during the Second Five-Year Plan, a 29-year-old ethnic Russian coal miner and jackhammer operator named Alexei Grigoryevich Stakhanov, working at a coal mine in eastern Ukraine, purportedly mined 102 tons of coal in a six-hour shift. This quantity was fourteen times his assigned quota, a remarkable achievement. You can explain it in part by the introduction of modern machinery to make mining more efficient, which was the kind of thing the Five-Year Plans were all about. You could also attribute Stakhanov's personal enthusiasm for socialism and the success of the Party program for economic growth. Or maybe it was a politically useful exaggeration.

It was probably some mix of all those things, but the story of this unassuming coal miner whose dedication to his labor made him a quiet hero of Soviet socialism was too good to pass up. The story of Stakhanov reached Stalin and the Politburo and the man was held up nationwide as a role model. He even made the cover of *Time* magazine in the United States. Soon stories were cropping up all over the Soviet Union of workers who had blown away their quota requirements. It became known as the Stakhanov movement, as Stakhanov clones appeared in virtually every Russian industry. Workers got into the spirit of the thing and competed to break records. It was an open secret that factory managers were rearranging the work schedules in their factories and altering documents to facilitate Stakhanov-like feats. It was goofy and mostly a public relations stunt, but Stalin loved it, so anyone who questioned or criticized the results of the Stakhanov movement not only drew criticism in return, but in many cases prison sentences.

The Party wholeheartedly supported scientific and technological innovation and the Soviet Union of the 1930s saw a great deal of scientific progress, particularly in the field of physics, and in the introduction of radio, electrification, and mechanization of agriculture. But scientific research was supervised and directed by Party officials, in principle to ensure that the scientists remained focused on work that would improve the lives of the masses. But ideology sometimes got in the way of science, and never more famously than in the case of Trofim Denisovich Lysenko, an ethnic Ukrainian agronomist.

Lysenko was born in 1898 to a poor peasant family and did not learn to read until the age of 13. He was an ardent Bolshevik and after the Revolution was able to gain admission to the Kiev Agricultural Institute, where he developed some odd ideas around creating new strains of common crops that could be cultivated in the Soviet Union's many cold and barren lands, turning them into gardens of plenty.

These were exciting promises, and Lysenko was making them when he was not yet thirty years old, in the late 1920s, when you'll recall that harvests were disappointing and Stalin was just turning away from the New Economic Policy and toward collectivization. In 1928, Lysenko published a paper based on work he had done at an experimental agricultural station in Azerbaijan. An exceptionally cold and dry winter in 1927-28 had killed the winter wheat seedlings that had been planted in the fall. Lysenko had exposed winter wheat seed grain to

moisture and cold to produce seed that was already primed, so to speak, to be planted and grown in the spring as if it were spring wheat, a process Lysenko called *vernalization*.

Now, the trick of exposing plants to cold artificially in order to simulate winter and thus “fool” the plant into putting out spring blooms was nothing new, even then. Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century does this with her house plants every year.

But Lysenko published his paper, based on these results from a small experimental farm, and made grandiose promises of new techniques that could soon massively boost crop yields in the Soviet Union. It looked like a triumph of Soviet science, and Lysenko’s background as a humble peasant boy—they called him the “barefoot scientist”—made him a darling of the Party and a favorite of Stalin himself.

But Lysenko upheld Communist ideology more fiercely than scientific truth. In particular, he hated genetics. I need to pause the story here to update you on the state of genetics in 1928. It began with the work of the Austrian friar Gregor Mendel in the mid-19th century. Mendel’s work demonstrated that the offspring of an organism inherit discrete traits from each parent, contrary to the prevailing wisdom that offspring develop a blend of their parents’ traits. These traits were presumably passed on through some hypothetical particle, which would eventually be called a *gene*, one from each parent. Which traits would appear in the offspring was a probabilistic problem that could be answered by statistical analysis. For example, two brown-eyed parents who both carried the recessive gene for blue eyes had a 25% chance of producing a blue-eyed child.

Mendel published a paper in an obscure journal, where his work languished until it was rediscovered in the early twentieth century. The word *genetics* was coined in 1905 to describe this branch of biology, and it was understood by 1928 that genes were somewhere inside chromosomes, which were in turn tucked away inside cellular nuclei, although exactly what a gene was and where exactly these elusive particles could be found remained a mystery.

This was the state of biology in 1928, and there were plenty of good geneticists in the Soviet Union. But Lysenko rejected the determinism of genetics as ideologically suspect. Communism teaches us that the masses do not remain static and determined, but are forever improving themselves. He went so far as to deny the existence of genes. He was also a skeptic of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection, which he dismissed as hopelessly bourgeois. For example, Darwin would say that an Alexei Stakhanov was a lucky mutation, and his presence among the working class could in no way be credited to the larger society. To Lysenko, this smacked of repulsive liberalism and capitalism, with their emphasis on the exceptional individual.

Communism teaches us that it is not the lucky appearance of a Stakhanov that improves society; it is a society dedicated to self-improvement that thrusts forward a Stakhanov. It is the will to improve that drives improvement. *That’s* how evolution works.

Ironically, on the other side of the world at this same time, in the United States, fundamentalist Christians were spearheading efforts to ban the teaching of Darwin's theory in public schools on the grounds that it promoted atheism and Communism. Pity poor Charles Darwin; the guy just can't catch a break.

In the Soviet Union, there were plenty of better trained and more experienced biologists ready to explain to Lysenko exactly where he was wrong, but Lysenko fought back bitterly against any criticism and denounced his critics as bourgeois reactionaries. Lysenko, you see, proclaimed not only that his process of vernalization could give you one good wheat crop, but that the seeds from that crop would retain the ability to sprout in the spring. Acquired characteristics could be inherited, and therefore the evolution of a species could be directed.

This is akin to suggesting that a three-legged dog will give birth to three-legged puppies, but with Stalin's firm backing, Lysenko became the biggest name in Soviet agriculture. He proclaimed that his technique of training plants to survive under harsher conditions would one day bring greenery to the slopes of the Caucasus and groves of orange trees would blossom in Siberia.

It was a glorious vision, and the best part was that it illustrated how science and Communist ideology, working in partnership, could produce technological wonders that would have been impossible without the Revolution.

It was also complete balderdash. One British biologist lamented that explaining genetics to Lysenko was like explaining calculus to someone who didn't understand the multiplication table. Lysenkoism was a thorough disaster, setting back the Soviet biological sciences by decades. Worse still, those who stood up for scientific truth against Lysenko's nonsense were exiled to Siberian labor camps or sent to prison or executed. Attempts to apply Lysenko's ideas led to food shortages in the Soviet Union, and later in other Communist nations, including China.

In our time, it has been suggested that food shortages caused by applied Lysenkoism were responsible for hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of deaths by starvation in the middle third of the twentieth century, making it perhaps the most catastrophic scientific error in human history.

[music: Dunaevskii and Daktil, "March of the Enthusiasts"]

The First Five-Year Plan and the famine that accompanied it left behind a measure of anger and resentment in the public and in the Party. Immediately after the end of the First Five-Year Plan, Stalin ordered a purge. We've seen the Communist Party of the Soviet Union undertake purges before. See episode 188. The purpose of a purge was supposed to be to expel from the Party those who resist Party leadership or ideology, careerists, lazy people, and generally those who joined the Party for selfish reasons.

A purge, up until this time, meant expulsion from the Party, and nothing more serious than that. The 1933 purge was a big one though; over 850,000 people lost their Party memberships. No doubt Stalin also saw the purge as an opportunity to get rid of those opposed to his leadership, especially ahead of the Seventeenth Party Congress, which was held in February 1934. At that Congress, where you might have expected Stalin to take a victory lap after the declared successes of the Five-Year Plan, he instead struck a strident tone, warning the Party to stay vigilant, warning that there were still vestiges of capitalism and anti-Lenin feeling in the country. Some Party leaders agreed with him. Others wanted to see an easing of political tensions. Those leaders rallied around the chief of the Leningrad Party, 47-year-old Sergei Kirov, who told the Congress, "The fundamental difficulties are already behind us."

Something went wrong for Stalin at this Congress. A movement emerged to replace him with Kirov. The Congress duly elected a new Central Committee, as it was supposed to, but the election results were never published, evidence that Stalin found them embarrassing. Even more embarrassing, Stalin lost his title of General Secretary of the Party. He was made merely Secretary of the Party, which sure sounds like a demotion, and he would have to share this new title with none other than Sergei Kirov.

A few things changed afterward. Kirov advocated for greater deference to legal procedures and an end to forced expropriations of grain from the peasants. Stalin was willing to compromise. In truth, there was not all that much difference between them.

But the political situation in the Soviet Union changed dramatically on December 1, 1934, when a thirty-year-old former Communist who had been expelled from the Party named Leonid Nikolaev shot and killed Sergei Kirov in Leningrad. By the end of the month, Nikolaev had been tried and executed. Over a hundred other people, alleged co-conspirators, were also prosecuted, including a number of officers in the NKVD, the secret police, who were prosecuted for dereliction of duty for not properly protecting Kirov.

Stalin was now the undisputed leader of the Party and the state once again, and he quickly took advantage of the murder of Kirov to settle scores with his opponents. The assassin had a tenuous connection to Zinoviev and Kamenev, which Stalin used to prosecute them and large numbers of their followers in the Party, who were sentenced to prison terms or exiled to Siberia.

In 1936, there was another controversy in the Party over the Second Five-Year Plan. Stalin, as usual, was pushing hard for more production and higher goals, despite his pledge to stop whipping the country. In August 1936, it was announced that the NKVD had uncovered evidence of a plot against Stalin and the Party, directed by Leon Trotsky from his exile, via communications through Zinoviev and Kamenev. The latter two were still in prison on charges stemming from the Kirov assassination. The defendants were told they would be executed unless they publicly confessed to being part of a Trotsky-led conspiracy, that Kirov had been murdered as part of the conspiracy, and the next planned victim would be Stalin himself. Zinoviev and

Kamenev made the public confessions demanded of them. They were executed anyway, the very next day. Trotsky was sentenced to death *in absentia*.

Leon Trotsky himself was living in Norway at the time, having lost his Soviet citizenship and having been expelled from France. The Norwegian government put Trotsky under house arrest and soon expelled him as well, to Mexico, where he lived the rest of his life until an NKVD assassin finally caught up to him in 1940.

This was not the end of the matter; this was only the beginning of what history knows as the Great Purge, under which officials whose loyalty was suspect were not merely expelled from the Party, but arrested, imprisoned, tortured, sent to Siberia, and/or executed. The fact that two of the Party's most prominent figures, Old Bolsheviks who were known to have been loyal to Lenin for decades, could be summarily tried and executed sent a chilling message that no one was beyond the reach of Stalin's disapproval. In May of 1937, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, the hero of the Civil War, the commander once hailed as the "Red Napoleon," was arrested and tortured until he was willing to confess that he had been planning a military coup. He, too, was executed shortly after his confession. His last words were reportedly a plea that he had always been loyal to the Motherland and to Comrade Stalin.

It was not only prominent Party and military figures who were targeted. The Great Purge ran wide and it ran deep. Every coal mine accident, every factory fire, every harvest shortfall was treated as sabotage and treason, for which a perpetrator needed to be identified and punished. The accused were "tried" before a three-person panel, called a troika, consisting of a prosecutor, a Party secretary, and a representative of the NKVD. These trials were brief and pro forma, with the sentence carried out immediately afterward. There were no appeals.

Each individual region of the USSR was actually assigned a quota of the number of spies and saboteurs to be identified and arrested in that region, along with further figures given for how many were to be imprisoned and how many executed and so on. Soon the authorities stopped trying to figure out who had actually done something wrong. People were arrested on the slightest of suspicions, or because of something they said or who they associated with, or because they were disliked. Those arrested were accused of taking orders from Trotsky, or from the British, or the Americans, or the Germans, or the Japanese. The use of torture to extract confessions was routine.

Official Soviet records state that more than 680,000 people were executed during the Great Purge. Millions more were imprisoned or sent to Siberia, to live under harsh conditions that killed hundreds of thousands more. If you believe Stalin, and no one does, some 3-4 million Soviet citizens, more than 2% of the country's population, were knowing and willing agents of foreign enemies.

No one was immune, no matter how high their Party rank. Remember that Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934 that had demoted Stalin? Of the 1,966 voting delegates to the Congress, 1,108,

or 56%, were arrested and charged with anti-Revolutionary activities. Of the 139 who were elected to the Central Committee, 98, or 70%, were ultimately executed.

In 1933, Joseph Stalin was undoubtedly the most powerful person in the Soviet Union, but it would be an exaggeration to call him a dictator. He still needed the support of the Central Committee to keep his job. His policies still had to survive examination and debate in the Politburo before they could be put into practice, and he had to answer to the Politburo when things went wrong.

By 1938, Stalin was certainly a dictator, the undisputed master of the Soviet Union, who wielded a degree of power the Romanovs would have envied. In our series on fascism, I was dismissive of attempts to lump together regimes of different ideologies under the broad category of “totalitarianism.” I said that ideology matters. Another thing that matters in distinguishing different types of authoritarian or totalitarian states is whether the leader has to answer to anyone, even if it’s only an unelected committee like the Politburo. What Stalin accomplished through the Great Purge was the elimination of all independent authority figures within the Party and the Soviet state. At the death of Lenin, the Politburo was a respected committee of Party elders who had earned their seats through their well-known contributions to the Revolution and Stalin needed their endorsement to wield power. A decade later, the members of the Politburo owed their positions to Stalin, who could remove them as easily as he had installed them, and their approval was no more than a rubber stamp.

The question emerges, regarding the assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934, which set the Great Purge in motion and gave Stalin his opportunity to consolidate his power: Was it just a lucky accident, one that gave Stalin an opening he was quick to use to his advantage? After Kirov’s death, the man was lionized as a Communist hero, just as Lenin had been, and for the same reason: because it was useful to Stalin. Cities and towns and streets were named after Kirov, as was a Soviet Navy cruiser. The old Imperial Russian Ballet, revived by the Communists as the Soviet Ballet was renamed the Kirov Ballet and would be known by that name for the next sixty years.

What about the alternative? The question here is analogous to the Reichstag fire in Germany, a year earlier, where one might ask: Was it orchestrated by the Nazis, or did they merely take advantage of the opportunity that fell into their laps? Similarly, was the assassination of Kirov fortuitous, or did Stalin actually order the killing himself, then turn Kirov into a hero and use his martyrdom as a weapon to further enhance his rule? If that’s what actually happened, it was a breathtaking, historic act of cynical deviousness.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Rasmus for his kind donation, and thank you to Cindy for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Rasmus and Cindy help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who

have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it's my own work, sometimes it's licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn from Russia to India and get caught up on events there. The Salt March, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

And one more thing. The Great Purge was politically useful to Stalin in consolidating his control. But it was also a time of madness. Even Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, suggested that if Lenin had still been alive, he too would have been purged. The purges were so widespread that even officials leading the purges were purged. There were even instances in which officials who purged officials who had purged officials were themselves purged, and no, I am not making this up.

To purge the Red Army's best officers, at the same time Germany was rearming and that Germany and Japan had signed an anti-Communist alliance and presented the USSR with the threat of a two-front war, was also madness. It's hard to credit Stalin with coldly calculating all of this. It seems more likely even he was caught up in the insanity. Years later, Nikita Khrushchev revealed that Stalin had once confided to him, "I trust no one, not even myself."

[music: Closing Theme]