Among the passengers who got off the Trans-Siberian express on its arrival in Petrograd on Sunday morning, March 12, 1917, were three prominent figures in the Bolshevik party: Matvei K. Muranov, who had served as one of five Bolshevik deputies in the Fourth State Duma; Lev B. Kamenev (Rozenfel'd), editor of the Bolshevik newspaper, Pravda, in 1913-14; and Joseph V. Stalin (Dzhugashvili), since 1912 a member of the party's Central Committee and its Russian Bureau. All three were returning from the Siberian exile to which they had been sentenced by tsarist authorities and from which they had just been freed under an amnesty that was one of the first official acts carried out by the new Provisional Government established shortly after the collapse of the tsarist regime and the abdication of Nicholas II on March 2.

Revolutionary politics and the winds of chance had brought the three men together briefly. For the first weeks after their return the three would cooperate closely in pursuit of their common interests; thereafter their careers would develop along divergent paths. For Kamenev, the path of life would lead ultimately to disgrace and execution on the orders of his 1917 comrade, Stalin. Muranov, in contrast, would live to see Stalin buried and would die in peaceful old age as a state pensioner.
As for Stalin, in March 1917 he was a comparatively young man (thirty-seven) in search of a greatness to which he felt destined but who had yet to discover the role and function in the world which would earn him the recognition to which he believed himself entitled. It would have seemed bizarre in the extreme had some bystander with the gift of prophecy recognized in the pockmarked, swarthy, short (five-foot four-inch) Georgian of March 1917 the man who would one day inspire awe, reverence, and terror as the most powerful despot Russia had ever known. Only in a time of revolutionary transformation would a meteoric rise to power like that of Stalin be possible, and even for Stalin the road to the summit was to be long, arduous, and dangerous. The eight months of the revolution, from February to October 1917, proved far from adequate as the launching base for his ascent; for Stalin, the year 1917 was to constitute such a mixed record of partial achievements and outright failures, missed opportunities and foolish blunders, that he could never afterwards contemplate it without acute discomfort. For that reason he devoted much of his energy in later years to the never-ending task of revising the record of his activities in 1917, correcting it, touching it up, or simply blotting it out from the collective memory of history.

In March 1917 Stalin had lived just over half of his allotted span; thirty-seven years old on December 21, 1916, he died a little over thirty-six years later, on March 5, 1953. Behind him lay years of struggle as an obscure, ambitious, and unscrupulous professional revolutionary; ahead lay the road to unlimited power, but power achieved at a staggering cost in human suffering.

At the time it seemed a stroke of luck for Stalin that he was one of the first political exiles to return to the capital after the overthrow of the autocracy. Ironically, the tsarist government had made an unwitting contribution to Stalin’s seeming good fortune. In October 1916, in an act of desperation, government authorities had decided to help meet the army’s insatiable demand for cannon fodder by inducting political prisoners and exiles. The order did not explicitly exclude Bolsheviks, despite the well-known antiwar stance of the party’s leader, Vladimir Il’ich Lenin. A convinced Leninist in the ranks of the tsarist army could do more harm to the national war effort than a platoon of enemy soldiers. By including Stalin’s name in the list of those to be called to the colors, the tsarist authorities in effect certified him to be nondangerous to the war effort—a useful clue to the questions that will confront us shortly of Stalin’s attitude toward Lenin’s stand on the war and toward Lenin himself.

Not all the Bolshevik exiles in Siberia were called up: Yakov M. Sverdlov, for example, a prominent party member who for a time...
shared quarters with Stalin in his Siberian exile, received no induction order. But Sverdlov had been an outspoken supporter of Lenin's stand on the war, a fact the tsarist authorities may have taken into account.

The induction order found Stalin in Kureika, a remote settlement north of the Arctic Circle in the forbidding and nearly inaccessible Turukhansk region. To reach Krasnoyarsk, a regional center where the medical examinations for call-ups were held, Stalin had to make a six-week journey across frozen tundra and along icebound rivers, reaching his destination only at the end of December 1916. As far as the stated purpose of his trip was concerned he could have saved himself the trouble, for the army doctors rejected him—not, as later hagiographers maintained, because he was regarded as politically dangerous, but because he had a withered left arm that prevented him from handling a rifle or a bayonet effectively. Stalin's future military glory, including self-appointment as Supreme Commander of the Soviet Armed Forces and the title of Generalissimo in the course of World War II, would have seemed sheer fantasy to the medical board that examined him in January 1917.

Rejection by the army was a stroke of luck, but the real gain for Stalin lay in the time advantage the call-up gave him. His four-year sentence of exile had only a few more months to run; taking advantage of the laxness of police surveillance in the waning days of tsarist power, Stalin simply remained near Krasnoyarsk, finding temporary shelter in the nearby town of Achinsk. From Achinsk it was only a few hours' trip to Krasnoyarsk, where he could catch the train for Petrograd, a four-days' journey. News of the tsar's abdication reached Stalin and other exiles in Achinsk early in March, and on the eighth a group including the three Bolshevik leaders boarded the train for the capital. En route some of the exiles sent a telegram to the ex-tsar's brother, Michael Romanoff, congratulating him on his decision not to assume the title of tsar in a last-ditch effort to save the dynasty. Kamenev was among those who signed the telegram, but not Stalin.

Stalin's early return to Petrograd and the advantages it gave him can usefully be contrasted with the experience of his friend and fellow Georgian G. K. Ordzhonikidze, who was languishing in the even more remote Siberian region of Yakutia at the time of the February Revolution and who remained there through May. As a result, in the words of biographers Georges Haupt and Jean-Jacques Marie, Ordzhonikidze played "only a minor role in the Revolution and Civil War."

Stalin's early arrival in Petrograd gave him a head start over Lenin, who came into the city on April 3. For some three weeks, therefore,
Stalin enjoyed the experience of being one of the top-ranking Bolsheviks at the center of a rapidly changing revolutionary situation. How effectively did he make use of his opportunity? The answer is provided by his later determination to suppress, distort, or obliterate the record of that period of his career and to silence or destroy the surviving witnesses to it. It is only thanks to the failure of some careless or remarkably brave and stubborn archivist to purge the files that one of the most damning records of Stalin's activities in this first phase of the revolution lay undetected during all the years of his supreme power, emerging intact only in 1962.

The Local Situation

When Stalin arrived in Petrograd he found that the major lines along which the revolution would develop had already been set, lines to which he could react and which he could hope to influence but which he was in no position to define, let alone to originate. There already existed a number of freshly minted political organizations established in the first flush of revolutionary enthusiasm, as well as some Bolshevik party bodies that had survived the final convulsions of expiring tsarism.

There was, first of all, the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' Deputies, established on February 27 on the initiative of the local Mensheviks and their rivals and allies, the Socialist Revolutionaries (SR's). A few Bolsheviks had also joined the Executive Committee of the Soviet, but it was dominated by the Mensheviks and SR's. In keeping with their interpretation of Marxist theory, the Mensheviks regarded the fall of tsarism as Russia's long-awaited bourgeois revolution, which would lead in the fullness of time to a liberal democratic republic and the flowering of Russian capitalist industrialization. Only when that process had run its course, with the growth of a large-scale working class, would Russia be ready for the proletarian revolution which, in Menshevik eyes, Marx had foretold. Until that time, which might lie decades in the future, the task of the workers' parties and their political organs such as the Soviet was to defend the interests of the workers against the bourgeois state and its capitalist allies. Under no conditions, the Mensheviks held, should a workers' party attempt to assume political power before the objective socioeconomic conditions capable of providing the basis for a socialist regime had been established. In support of this position the Mensheviks could invoke the authority of Friedrich Engels, who had specifically warned of the dangers a socialist government would face if it were set up before its time. Since Russia in 1917 manifestly had not attained the conditions
described by Engels as essential for a successful proletarian revolution, the Mensheviks reasoned that the Soviet must abstain from exercising power, even though there were militant workers in Petrograd who were anxious to set up a provisional revolutionary government. Reluctantly, the SR’s accepted the Mensheviks’ self-denying logic, all the more readily since their own program provided guidance only up to the revolution, not beyond it.

Although in theory an expression of grass-roots initiative on the part of the factory workers, the Soviet was in fact built from the top down, owing its genesis to a self-chosen executive committee of ranking Menshevik and SR leaders who came together at a time when the troops of the Petrograd garrison had already broken with their tsarist commanders. It was the Executive Committee that organized the election of deputies in the plants and factories of Petrograd, and it was the same Executive Committee that continued thereafter to speak in the name of the Soviet as representative of the workers.

In apparent confirmation of the Menshevik-SR theory of the revolution, a new provisional government manifestly bourgeois in character appeared almost simultaneously. It emerged in the final days of tsarism out of the Provisional Committee of the Fourth State Duma, a committee that had been called into existence in a desperate effort to maintain a modicum of continuity in the exercise of state power. The Duma, in turn, was a quasi-legislative body that had been elected in the far-off prewar year of 1912 by an electorate deliberately restricted by the tsarist government in such a way as to give preponderant influence to the propertied and well-to-do classes. Thus it was the unmistakably middle- and upper-class Provisional Government that took a rather shaky grip on power at the time of the collapse of the tsarist regime, while the Petrograd Soviet contented itself with exercising a wary supervision over the government’s behavior in the name of the workers.

A formula expressing this “dual power” relationship soon emerged in the speeches and publications of the Soviet: the Soviet would support the Provisional Government “insofar as” it defended the achievements of the revolution.

On one point the Soviet leaders drew the line: none of them must sully their socialist virtue by accepting a position in the Provisional Government. For its part, the latter was eager to draw in some of the moderate socialists as a means of broadening its base and strengthening its authority. The Mensheviks and SR’s stood firm, however; a leading Menshevik, the Georgian Nikolai Chkheidze, refused a tempting invitation to join the Provisional Government as minister of justice. Less scrupulous and more ambitious, a rising young socialist
lawyer from Lenin’s home town of Simbirsk, Alexander Kerensky, accepted the offer when it was addressed to him, justifying his action on the ground that the socialists needed their own spokesman in the bourgeois camp.

The local Petrograd Bolsheviks took only a small part in the formation of the Soviet, and none at all in that of the Provisional Government. The February Revolution found them in some disarray, for as one of its final efforts the Okhrana (tsarist security police) had arrested the Petersburg Committee (PK) of the Bolshevik party on February 26. (The committee insisted on calling itself the “Petersburg” rather than “Petrograd” committee, to indicate its disapproval of the renaming of the capital in 1914, on the ground that the change was an expression of national chauvinism.) It was not until March 2 that a group of local Petrograd Bolsheviks came together in the attic of the Central Labor Exchange Building to hold their first formal session after the February Revolution.

During the interval while the Petersburg Committee was in limbo, its authority was assumed by the nominally subordinate raion (district) committee of the Vyborg raion, one of the sections of the capital with a predominantly working-class population, and one where the workers held a particularly strong faith in the capacity of their class to make their own revolution, without the aid of party intellectuals. Even after the reestablishment of the Petersburg Committee, the Vyborg Raion Committee continued to exert a strong influence on Bolshevik policy, usually throwing its weight to the more radical end of the political spectrum.

Even without the timely initiative of the Vyborg Raion Committee, the temporary eclipse of the Petersburg Committee would not have meant the total absence of a Bolshevik voice in the February Revolution, thanks to the existence of yet another body, the Russian Bureau of the Central Committee of the party. In its origins this body went back to the prerevolutionary years—Stalin had at one time been one of its members—but its presence in Petrograd in February 1917 reflected the hard work and revolutionary zeal of three young men who had joined the party before the war and who had somehow avoided arrest by the Okhrana. Two of the young men were from a working-class background: Aleksandr Gavrilovich Shlyapnikov, whose detailed and all-too-candid memoirs of this period would later earn for him Stalin’s murderous hostility, and Pyotr A. Zalutsky, who never wrote his memoirs but who nonetheless fell victim to Stalin’s wrath because of his outspoken criticism of Stalin’s policies in 1917 and subsequently.

The third member of the Russian Bureau was an intellectual of
middle-class background, Vyacheslav M. Skryabin, soon to make a name for himself under his party pseudonym, Molotov (from molot, “hammer,” presumably as a gesture of self-identification with the workers). Under the leadership of Shlyapnikov, who had worked in close contact with Lenin and who had been co-opted to the Central Committee in September 1915, these three young and still inexperienced men did their best to speak in the name of the party and to define its position on the urgent problems arising out of the revolution.

Their first action was the publication of a manifesto on February 27, “To All the Citizens of Russia,” which called on the workers and soldiers to elect representatives to a provisional revolutionary government. Though issued in the name of the Russian Bureau, the manifesto was in fact the work of a group of members of the Vyborg Raion Committee, who wanted to head off an intellectual-led socialist revolution by preempting the ground through the establishment of their own worker-led provisional government. The effort failed, primarily because it lacked a broad base of support in the Petrograd proletariat, but in part because it was overtaken and thrust aside by the better-organized movement to set up the citywide Soviet of Workers’ Deputies. In any case the February 27 manifesto, which reflected Bolshevik policy as it had been worked out during the Revolution of 1905, was little more than a stopgap measure, a quick improvisation designed to assert the party’s continuing existence and its determination to make its voice heard.

It soon became apparent to the members of the Russian Bureau, however, that there was a pressing need for a steadier and more continuous medium for articulating party policy. The total abolition of censorship, one of the first actions of the Provisional Government, had the welcome effect of lifting the ban on Pravda, which dated back to the early days of the war, and on March 2 the Russian Bureau assigned to Molotov the task of reestablishing the party newspaper. A printing press was soon found, and editorial offices were established in the same building. At its meeting on March 4 the Russian Bureau formally resolved to publish Pravda as the organ of the party Central Committee and jointly, pending other arrangements, of the Petersburg Committee. Reflecting this dual responsibility, the editorial board was to be composed of two representatives of the bureau and one of the Petersburg Committee. The first number of the new Pravda appeared on the following day, with free distribution, while the second issue, on March 6, sold one hundred thousand copies, according to Shlyapnikov, an indication of the eager response of the Petrograd workers to the Bolshevik line as defined in Pravda.
MARCH

Under Molotov's editorial direction Pravda took a clear-cut stand of opposition to the Provisional Government as a bourgeois institution and continued to call for the election instead of a provisional revolutionary government, in accordance with the bureau's manifesto of February 27. It soon became apparent, however, that in this matter Pravda did not speak for all the Bolsheviks of Petrograd; in particular, the Petersburg Committee (PK) took a less hostile position toward the Provisional Government. At a meeting on March 3 the PK, after listening to Molotov's advocacy of the bureau's policy, voted instead "not to oppose the power of the Provisional Government insofar as its actions correspond to the interests of the proletariat and the broad democratic masses of the people," a conciliatory position indistinguishable from that of the Menshevik-SR leadership in the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. Thus on this crucial point an influential group of Bolsheviks in the capital occupied a position close to that of the other socialist parties.

The Family

For many young people in tsarist Russia one of the most potent lures of the revolutionary movement was the opportunity it provided for association with an extended social grouping of friends, collaborators, and like-minded individuals. The time-honored greeting within the revolutionary movement, tovarishch, "comrade," had not yet lost its warmth. Especially for "illegals" like Stalin, revolutionaries who had run afoul of the law and who were forced to live in hiding, the knowledge that in virtually any town or city throughout the Russian Empire they could be sure of finding a friendly welcome, food and lodging, and the technical facilities to continue their revolutionary activities went far to mitigate the loneliness, danger, and insecurity of their lives.

Stalin was nearly thirty before he had the opportunity to see at first hand the splendors of St. Petersburg. It was in July 1909 that he made his first fleeting visit to the capital, and another two years before he returned. Once again, ironically, it was the tsarist authorities who helped shape the course of Stalin's future destiny. By forbidding him to live in the Caucasus, including his native province, Georgia, some nameless tsarist official in June 1911 contributed to Stalin's emergence from the provincial backwater where he had spent the first ten years of his revolutionary career. True, the same administrative order banned him from residing in the capital cities, St. Petersburg and Moscow, as well as other major industrial centers, but it was easy for an experienced "illegal" to slip through the police surveillance net-
work. In September 1911 Stalin enjoyed a three-day visit to St. Petersburg before the police caught up with him, and in April 1912 he managed to live there illegally for three weeks before being arrested. In the autumn of that year he was back for what would prove to be his longest prerevolutionary sojourn in the capital, from September 12, 1912, to February 23, 1913, with time out for two short trips abroad.

When Stalin arrived in Petrograd in March 1917, therefore, he was coming back to a city where he already knew his way around. Losing no time he headed for the apartment of an old friend, Sergei Alliluev, a skilled engineer who lived with his family in the working-class Vyborg district north of the main channel of the Neva River.

The Alliluevs, a close-knit family of father, mother, and three lively daughters, provided Stalin with an adoptive family that offered him the warmth, concern, and affection of which his life had hitherto known all too little. Stalin’s first marriage had ended in 1908 with the death of his young wife, Yekaterina Svanidze; his son by that marriage, Yakov, took his father’s legal surname, Dzhugashvili, but was never close to his father, and his death in a German prisoner-of-war camp during World War II left Stalin apparently unmoved.

Stalin’s own father was a cobbler by trade and a heavy drinker by reputation, with a foul temper which he was prone to take out in beating his wife and infant son, the future dictator. It was Stalin’s mother, a devout and pious woman, who implanted in the frail and sickly boy the conviction that he had the potential for greatness, and it was his mother who set him on the path to advancement by arranging for his entry, after elementary school, into the Tiflis Theological Seminary where he could receive the training qualifying him for membership in the upper clergy of the Georgian Orthodox Church. But there is no evidence that Stalin was ever emotionally close to his mother; not a single letter from him to her has been published.

Stalin had, it seems, a second son, whose name and identity have been lost to history. During his last, longest, and most rigorous exile, from 1913 to 1916, he lived for stretches of time in complete isolation, and in a moment of uncharacteristic frankness he later told one of the Alliluev girls that he had taken as mistress a peasant woman who bore him a son. Both mother and son, if they really existed—and the evidence is far from conclusive—seem to have been brusquely abandoned when Stalin returned to European Russia at the end of 1916; except for Stalin’s indiscreet revelation, they were never heard of again.

Thus it was to none of his closest relations—parents, wife, mistress, or sons—that Stalin could look for family affection. All the more important in his private life, then, were the Alliluevs. The close family
ties between Stalin and the Alliluevs were cemented by marriage: two years after the revolution one of the Alliluev girls, Nadya, became Stalin’s wife. (Thirteen years later, in despair over what he had become and his harsh policy toward the peasants, she committed suicide.)

Sergei Alliluev, the father, was employed in the Tiflis railway shop as a skilled mechanic when he first observed young Dzhugashvili, a fledgling revolutionary, in 1900; within a few years Alliluev made the young man’s personal acquaintance and a friendly relationship grew up between the older Russian worker, who had been deported to the Transcaucasus because of his political radicalism, and the young Georgian who was just embarking on a revolutionary career.

Sergei’s wife, Ol’ga Yevgen’evna, took little part in the men’s political activities but devoted her energies to maintaining the home and raising her children. A woman of warmth and sympathetic temperament, she found room in her maternal affections for the rough but susceptible young Georgian whom her husband had befriended. It was to Ol’ga Yevgen’evna that Stalin wrote the only personal letter of his which has survived from the prerevolutionary years, a note in which Stalin thanks Mrs. Allilueva for her “kind and good sentiments” toward him as well as for a parcel she had sent him. Evidently something of the Alliluev family warmth transmitted itself to the normally unresponsive Stalin, for in the same letter he urged Ol’ga Yevgen’evna not to spend money on him which the Alliluevs needed themselves.²

It is to the reminiscences of Sergei Alliluev and his daughter Anna that we are indebted for a number of glimpses, fleeting but revealing, into the personal and emotional life of Stalin in 1917. With the Alliluevs Stalin felt at home; in the warmth of their family circle he could relax and show a side of his nature—fun-loving, even playful—of which the world would otherwise have no inkling.

A Sour Welcome

Having touched base with the Alliluevs and arranged for a temporary lodging elsewhere (the Alliluevs were in the process of moving to a larger apartment, and Stalin asked them to include a room for him), Stalin, together with his Krasnoyarsk colleagues, made his way to Bolshevik headquarters. It was symptomatic of the topsy-turvy world of revolution that party headquarters were now established, not, as would have been customary under tsarism, in some obscure, out-of-the-way worker’s rooms, carefully hidden from the snooping of the
Okhrana, but in the center of the most fashionable district of the capital, in a mansion that had been commandeered from its previous owner, Matilda Kshesinskaya, whose talents as a prima ballerina in the Imperial Ballet had done less to earn her this valuable property than her brief but well-publicized liaison with the heir to the throne, the future Tsar Nicholas II.

Party headquarters in early March 1917, pending Lenin’s return, meant the Russian Bureau of the Central Committee, comprising at first the three young men whom we have already met—Shlyapnikov, Zalutsky, and Molotov. One of the three, Molotov, was already acquainted with Stalin, having worked with him on Pravda in the period 1912–13.

During the first days of March, as party life quickly revived in an atmosphere of unbounded political freedom, additional party figures were added to the bureau, so that by the time of Stalin’s return it numbered more than a dozen members. It was this body that met on the afternoon of March 12 to consider how best to employ the services of the recruits who had just come back from Siberia.

With regard to Muranov, the members of the bureau had no hesitation: by unanimous vote he was invited to join with full privileges. The vote showed that the bureau was not insisting that its members follow a strict party line, for it was generally known that Muranov, as a deputy to the State Duma, had been less than firm in his support of Lenin’s antiwar stance. But Muranov’s record in exile was unblemished, and it was no doubt this fact that earned him the bureau’s cordial welcome.

Stalin’s candidacy proved more difficult. In the words of the protocol of the bureau’s session, first published in 1962,

It was reported that he [Stalin] had been an agent of the Central Committee in 1912 and therefore it would be advisable to have him as a member. . . . However, in view of certain personal characteristics, the Bureau decided to give him only a consultative vote. 3

Thus at the very outset of the revolution a group of Stalin’s party comrades voted to deny him the prerogatives to which his party rank entitled him because of certain unspecified “personal characteristics.” In so doing they struck a note that was to resound ominously throughout Stalin’s entire career, reaching its definitive formulation in the words of Lenin’s Testament, “Stalin is too rude.”

Regrettably, the protocols of the March 12 session are silent as to the specific nature of Stalin’s “personal characteristics”; either the members prudently avoided spelling them out in the discussion of his
candidacy, or the secretary who wrote up the protocols, a young woman named Yelena Stasova, considered it wise not to record them. The result is that we are left to speculate on the exact nature of the charge, with the further result that a number of differing guesses have been offered by recent biographers of Stalin. For Adam Ulam, the reference is "undoubtedly" to Stalin’s work on the editorial board of Pravda in 1912-13, and the source of the negative report would thus logically be Molotov. If true, this would be, as Ulam says, "piquant," in view of the fact that Molotov was later one of Stalin’s most faithful supporters. Elsewhere Ulam recognizes that "unflattering rumors about Stalin’s behavior in exile must have reached some Petrograd comrades," but he fails to connect this insight with the March 12 vote of the Russian Bureau.4

Robert C. Tucker, on the other hand, believes that "undoubtedly . . . the allusion was to his [Stalin’s] arrogance, aloofness, and uncomradely behavior during the Turukhansk exile."5 Despite the confidence with which these explanations are advanced, complete certainty in the matter is unobtainable by the very nature of the laconic wording of the protocol, but the weight of available evidence points to Tucker’s hypothesis as the more probable one. It is supported by the unpublished memoirs of an Old Bolshevik, Boris I. Ivanov, in which Stalin is described as being "‘as proud as ever, as locked up in himself, in his own thoughts and plans’ ” and as keeping “‘aloof from all other political exiles’ ” as Ivanov saw him toward the end of 1916.6 With new arrivals from Siberia pouring into the capital daily, gossipy reports on the exiles’ behavior were bound to become common knowledge, and Stalin’s record in exile provided ample grounds for the kind of hostile criticism which lay behind the March 12 verdict.

Ivanov’s description of Stalin shows a keen insight into the latter’s psychology. “Proud,” “locked up in himself and his own plans”—these words go far beyond the surface observation of Stalin’s “uncomradely” behavior and indicate on Ivanov’s part a recognition in Stalin of an inner motivation different from that of the other Siberian exiles. Ivanov’s testimony enables us to postulate that as early as December 1916 Stalin was thinking of himself as not merely one of the leading group of the Bolshevik party but potentially as something greater, possibly not yet clearly formulated in his own mind. Thus the “uncomradely” behavior that lay behind the Russian Bureau’s unfavorable vote on March 12 concealed something much more startling: nothing less than Stalin’s image of himself as party leader, a concept significantly different from that of collective leadership held by virtually all other Bolsheviks.
Stalin and Kamenev

Like Stalin, Kamenev was dealt a stinging rebuff by the Russian Bureau at its meeting on March 12. According to the protocol, the bureau decided to add him [Kamenev] to the staff of Pravda if he offers his services. . . . His articles are to be accepted for Pravda, but he is not to get a by-line.7

Nothing was said about membership in the bureau. In Kamenev's case, however, the motive behind the bureau's adverse vote was made clear. Its reasons, as set forth in the protocol, centered around a trial in a tsarist court in February 1915 at which Kamenev had appeared as one of the defendants, along with the five Bolshevik deputies to the State Duma. The charge was that of treason, based on Lenin's policy of "turning the imperialist war into a civil war." As editor of Pravda and as adviser to the Bolshevik fraction in the Duma, Kamenev was held accountable for the policies that Lenin, in emigration, was enunciating. Partly because he sincerely disagreed with Lenin on the nature of the war—Kamenev saw Russia as fighting a defensive war against Germany and her allies—and partly from considerations of prudence—he was a man who deplored violence and who tried to avoid unnecessary controversy—Kamenev at the trial dissociated himself from Lenin's position.

Despite this apostasy, which amounted to a violation of the Bolshevik principle of democratic centralism under which party members were bound to support policies adopted by the leadership even when they disagreed with them, Kamenev was found guilty, but the punishment imposed was a comparatively mild one: exile to the Yenisei district of Siberia, a far less rigorous area than the one to which Stalin had been banished. There, at the settlement of Monastyrskoe in the summer of 1915, Kamenev was forced to face a second "trial," this time before a group of his revolutionary comrades. As it happened, Stalin was present, having been allowed to make the trip downriver from Kureika for the purpose.

During the period of Stalin's dictatorship the record of his participation in the 1915 trial was falsified to make it appear that "he stigmatized the cowardly and treacherous behavior of Kamenev at the trial of the five Bolshevik members of the Fourth Duma."8 There was, in fact, a group among the exiles which took this line, but it was led not by Stalin, who maintained a noncommittal silence, but by Yakov Sverdlov and Suren Spandaryan, two Central Committee members in exile. Years later Spandaryan's widow, Vera Shveitser, in Trotsky's
stinging words, "was forced to ascribe to Stalin what had actually been done by her husband," that is, to portray Stalin as the leader in condemning Kamenev's disavowal of Lenin's policy on the war. Thanks in part to Stalin's refusal to join Sverdlov and Spandaryan, the Monastyrskoe trial ended with a resolution approving the behavior of the Duma Bolshevik faction at the earlier trial. The verdict constituted a vindication for Kamenev, and Stalin, by his refusal to support the party militants, had made a significant contribution to this outcome.

In part, no doubt, Stalin's reluctance to become embroiled in the controversy reflected his lack of interest in the time-honored Russian practice of heatedly debating politically urgent but abstract questions. As Isaac Deutscher puts it,

"Thrashing out principles for their own sake, without the faintest chance for their immediate application, was not his [Stalin's] pet occupation."

In its effect on his relations with Kamenev, however, Stalin's restraint at the 1915 trial had a more positive aspect: it helped shield Kamenev from a reproof that the militants were intent on inflicting on him, and that could have had serious consequences for his future standing in the party. The March 12 censure of Kamenev by the Russian Bureau, at a time when Sverdlov was still thousands of miles from Petrograd and Spandaryan's body was rotting in a Siberian grave, showed the depth of feeling among party members on the war issue. Stalin's restraint in 1915 had certainly earned him some credit in Kamenev's eyes as a possible ally, if not a friend. Years later, when Kamenev had been exposed as an "enemy of the people," Stalin's official biographers were at pains to dissociate him completely from any indication of approval of Kamenev's position on the war in 1915; hence the need to dragoon Vera Shveitser into substituting Stalin's name for that of her husband, Spandaryan, in her memoirs.

Behind the cordial relationship between Stalin and Kamenev established by the 1915 episode lay a long record of contacts which stretched back as far as 1904, when Kamenev first met the youthful Dzhugashvili on a trip to Tiflis where he was carrying out an assignment by Lenin to organize a conference of Caucasian Bolsheviks. Dzhugashvili, though three years older than Kamenev, was by comparison a raw, provincial party worker, too obscure and powerless to play any part in Kamenev's activities, too insignificant and unknown to attend the conference when it met in November 1904.

After that first, inconclusive contact the two men lost touch with each other for more than ten years. Though they both served on the editorial board of Pravda, they missed each other there, since it was
only after Stalin’s arrest in February 1913 that Kamenev was directed by Lenin to take over the editorship of the party journal. By 1915 both men had climbed high in the party hierarchy, Stalin as a member of the Central Committee, Kamenev as its most prominent journalist.

Stalin’s prudent restraint vis-à-vis Kamenev at the Monastyrskoe trial in July 1915 can therefore be seen not simply as the result of a lack of interest in debating abstract principles but as the prudent avoidance of censuring a party functionary whose record and standing in the party made him a figure to be reckoned with, someone whose friendship it would be worth Stalin’s time to cultivate.

In terms of self-assurance and a well-defined position in the party, Kamenev was far superior to Stalin. The 1915 episode represents a turning point in their relationship, when Stalin for the first time ranked in a position of approximately equal authority with Kamenev, the first time when he was in a position to extend a helping hand to the younger man.

We catch a revealing glimpse of the two men on the eve of the revolution through the eyes of Anatoly Baikalov, a member of the Yenisei Union of Cooperatives who happened to be in Achinsk in February 1917 and who later wrote several accounts of what he remembered of that occasion. Despite the lapse of many years between the actual observations and the publication of Baikalov’s recollections in 1940 and 1950, his account carries conviction in its portrayal of a taciturn, pipe-smoking Stalin yielding to the more articulate Kamenev in conversation and nodding his agreement with Kamenev’s forecast that the war would end with a German victory, to be followed by a bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia.11

Muranov Lends a Hand

Stalin was not forced to submit to the indignity of conditional membership in the Russian Bureau for long. On the very next day, March 13, the bureau reversed itself and accepted him as a full member, at the same time naming him a member of the editorial board of Pravda. At the same session Molotov, pleading inexperience, asked to be relieved from his duties on the editorial board.

If the people with whom Stalin came into contact in 1917 are grouped into categories in accordance with the degree to which they were attracted to or repelled by him, Molotov must be ranked in the category of clients and disciples. He was to be one of the first who accepted at face value Stalin’s own vision of his future greatness and who helped contribute to the realization of that vision by selfless devotion to Stalin. Conclusive evidence is lacking as to just when
MARCH

Molotov saw the light and recognized in Stalin someone greater than himself, service to whom would be his life work. The March 13 session of the Russian Bureau was evidently not yet that moment, but it represented the first recognition by Molotov that contesting Stalin’s ambition was not the path he wanted to follow.

Stalin, we can be sure, was present at the March 13 session and must have made a strong case for himself. The decisive effort on his behalf, however, is likely to have been made by Muranov, who, it will be recalled, had been accorded voting privileges on the preceding day. The events of the next few days show that the three exiles who returned from Siberia on March 12 worked closely together for the promotion of their common interests, with Muranov providing the initial push.

The results of this campaign were announced by Pravda on March 15. To facilitate the conduct of current business in the rapidly expanding Russian Bureau a new five-person presidium was established, in which two of the newcomers, Stalin and Muranov, confronted an equal number of “old” members, Shlyapnikov and Zalutsky. To provide balance and help avoid a tie vote a fifth member was added, the faithful party stalwart Yelena D. Stasova, who also brought needed secretarial skills to the position. (It is to her well-kept protocols, amazingly preserved during the years of the Stalinist tyranny, that we are indebted for our knowledge of the work of the Russian Bureau at this period.)

Also announced by Pravda on the fifteenth was a radical shakeup in the newspaper’s editorial board. Muranov, claiming rank as one of the Bolshevik deputies in the State Duma, assumed overall responsibility for Pravda’s editorial policies, on the ill-founded but convenient pretext that the newspaper was the organ of the Bolshevik fraction in the Duma. (In fact and in theory, Pravda was the organ of the party Central Committee or its authorized representative, the Russian Bureau, but during the tsarist period, to ease its troubled relations with the censors, it had made use of the legal subterfuge that it was simply the organ of the Bolshevik fraction in the Duma.)

Serving with Muranov were his Krasnoyarsk comrades, Stalin and Kamenev. Kamenev had, in fact, already jumped the gun by publishing a signed article in Pravda on the thirteenth, thereby violating the Russian Bureau’s order denying him a by-line.

Finally, on March 15 Pravda reported the designation of Muranov, Kamenev, and Stalin as Bolshevik representatives to the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. Thus in the short space of three days Stalin overcame his lame start and earned a triple promotion: to full membership in the Russian Bureau, to the editorial board of
Pravda, and to the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. His mandate as a member of the party Central Committee, dating back to 1912, was still valid, giving him a position of potential strength which enabled him to outface any rivals. (Shlyapnikov, too, was a member of the Central Committee, but he lacked Stalin's talent for self-assertion.) It was an impressive start, made all the more dramatic against the background of the unflattering reception accorded him by the Russian Bureau on March 12.

Gratitude for services rendered is a motive that Stalin's biographer is seldom called on to attribute to him. Yet a long view of the relationship between Stalin and Muranov provides grounds for suspecting the existence of this, for Stalin, rare emotion. The strongest evidence is the fact that Muranov was one of the handful of Old Bolsheviks who had served alongside Stalin in 1917 who survived the Great Purge (1936–38), and who died as an honored state pensioner in 1959. Muranov's discreet silence over the years is, without doubt, an essential part of the explanation for his unusual good fortune; unlike Shlyapnikov and others, Muranov never incurred Stalin's wrath by publishing the memoirs of 1917 which his experiences richly qualified him to write.

Muranov, however, had other, more positive services to Stalin to his credit. For example, in 1931 he served as a member of the judicial board in one of the early show trials mounted by the secret police, the trial of the so-called Menshevik Center. There were many Old Bolsheviks, of course, who could point to a record of service to Stalin no less meritorious but who nevertheless fell victim to the Great Purge. The speculation therefore arises that Stalin must have recognized some special bond linking him with Muranov, must have felt some lingering warmth, which earned Muranov one of the rare winners' tickets in the macabre lottery known as the Great Purge.

This consideration serves to strengthen the suggestion that it was Muranov, more than anyone else, who gave Stalin his first boost up the ladder of political advancement in 1917. It might be argued that Kamenev, too, had helped Stalin over the first obstacles in his path in 1917, yet earned no such gratitude later. We shall, in fact, find Stalin defending Kamenev against Lenin's wrath in the days just before the Bolshevik seizure of power in October, and to that extent, a feeling of obligation or gratitude might be postulated in Stalin. As to the difference between Muranov's and Kamenev's fate in the Great Purge, it is enough to point to the fact that Kamenev, after Lenin's death, proved to be one of the staunchest and most effective critics of Stalin's claim to supreme power. Furthermore, unlike Muranov, who never aspired
to a position in the top leadership, Kamenev was a close confidant and ally of Lenin and possible successor to his power. For all these reasons Stalin could feel no lasting sense of indebtedness to Kamenev. Muranov, by a combination of positive and negative factors—helpful actions and equally helpful silences—may therefore have given Stalin the opportunity to display one of his rarest and least often employed traits, gratitude for services rendered.

Did Stalin Pull Rank?

The association of the names of Muranov, Kamenev, and Stalin in the reorganizations and appointments announced by Pravda on March 15 strongly suggests the existence of a working agreement amongst the three. Within this troika—the first in Stalin's revolutionary career—the predominant role at the outset appears to have been played by Muranov, with Kamenev supplying the theoretical basis and Stalin playing the role of junior partner. Muranov, it will be remembered, was the only one of the three who was accepted into full membership by the Russian Bureau at its March 12 meeting, the only one against whom no objections were raised.

Once granted full membership in the bureau, Muranov was in a position to affect its future course of action, and he presumably used this power to help bring in Stalin as a full member and ally on the thirteenth. Together the two collaborators were then able to solidify their position by taking over Pravda, in company with Kamenev, moving into the newly formed Presidium of the Russian Bureau, and, for good measure, establishing a beachhead in the Petrograd Soviet. Altogether the three-day operation represented a triumph of organizational skill in manipulating party politics.

Several biographers of Stalin, impressed by the seeming ease with which he established a strong position in the Bolshevik organization in Petrograd, have assumed that he was the real instigator of the organizational changes announced by Pravda on March 15. The lead in establishing this view was taken by Trotsky, writing at a time when the evidence was less extensive than it now is. For Trotsky, there could be no doubt that the central role in the takeover of Pravda was played by Stalin:

As soon as he reached Petrograd . . . Stalin went directly to Bolshevik headquarters. . . . Letting others crack their voices addressing workers' and soldiers' meetings, Stalin entrenched himself at headquarters. More than four years ago, after the Prague conference, he had been co-opted to the Central committee. Since then much water had run over the dam. But
the exile from Kureika [Stalin] had the knack of keeping his hold on the Party machine; he still regarded his old mandate as valid. Aided by Kamenev and Muranov, he first of all removed from leadership the “Leftist” Central Committee Bureau and the Pravda editorial board. He went about it rather rudely, the more so since he had no fear of resistance and was in a hurry to show that he was boss.¹²

Trotsky was followed in this interpretation by Deutscher, who writes:

On the grounds of his formal seniority as a member of the Central Committee of 1912, he [Stalin] “deposed” the Petersburg trio [Shlyapnikov, Zalutsky, and Molotov] and, together with Kamenev, took over the editorship of Pravda.¹³

Ulam puts essentially the same view more colorfully:

Stalin had won his first open political contest. He could not have had too much assistance from the mild and indecisive Kamenev. [Ulam does not even mention Muranov.] But he had his self-assurance and his domineering manner, distasteful to his comrades and yet impressive at a bewildering time. He was far from being the polished intriguer that he would become in a few years, but he towered over his opponents... Stalin was indisputably the senior Bolshevik on the spot.¹⁴

Edward E. Smith also sees Stalin as the ringleader in the changes effected between March 12 and 15:

He [Stalin] hurried off to the offices of Pravda where, using his credentials as a Central Committee member co-opted in 1912 by Lenin himself, he began to clean house... He brought into the Pravda offices a new staff, which was, of course, subservient to his direction.¹⁵

The same point of view is espoused by Boris Souvarine:

[Stalin] brusquely evict[ed] the management of the paper [Pravda], without taking any notice of the organization or of the cadres, solely on the strength of his membership in the Central Committee by simple co-optation.¹⁶

Robert V. Daniels agrees:

At this juncture the leaders from Siberia arrived. Kamenev and Stalin, ranking as Central Committee members [Kamenev was not, in fact, a member of the CC], quite naturally took over the party organization and the editorial control of Pravda.¹⁷

W. H. Chamberlin echoes the general line but confines himself to the change in editorship of Pravda:
March

Stalin, Kamenev and Muranov returned to Petrograd on March 25 [New Style] and, resting on their superior status in the Party organization, carried out a sort of coup d'état in the editorial office of Pravda.¹⁸

Robert C. Tucker adopts a more cautious tone but takes basically the same position:

After his [Stalin’s] chilly initial reception, he successfully asserted his authority.¹⁹

In a balanced account, E. H. Carr writes:

Kamenev was an experienced writer and had been appointed editor of the central party organ—at that time the Rabochaya gazeta [a cover name of Pravda], by the Prague conference of 1912; Stalin, having been a member of the central committee of the party since 1912, replaced Shlyapnikov as senior party organizer in Petrograd; Muranov was one of the Bolshevik deputies of the fourth Duma. ... They at once took over the reins of authority from Shlyapnikov and his young colleagues.²⁰

But even Carr sees Stalin’s membership in the Central Committee as the decisive lever. Following Trotsky’s lead, all these writers in varying degrees draw a picture that reflects their knowledge of Stalin’s later career. If we confine ourselves to the evidence for March 1917, however, a picture less flattering to Stalin emerges. The first point to be noted is that Bolshevik principles did not provide any basis for the assertion of seniority by a member of the Central Committee, certainly not the overriding of a valid vote taken by a duly constituted party organization such as the Russian Bureau. Even if Bolshevik policy had sanctioned such an action, however, the situation in Petrograd ruled it out, for one of the local Petrograd Bolsheviks whom Muranov, Kamenev, and Stalin pushed aside, Shlyapnikov, was no less a member of the Central Committee than Stalin, and had been in much more recent touch with the party leader than Stalin in his remote Siberian exile. To suppose, with Trotsky and others, that Stalin in March 1917 could have used “his old Party mandate” to “show them who was boss” is to misread the events of 1917 in the light of party practice at a much later time when Stalin had in fact made himself “boss.” It is also to misjudge Stalin’s still precarious and uncertain position in March 1917, and, in consequence, to underestimate the difficulties he faced before he emerged into a position of recognized authority. He had shown he knew how to use power, in alliance with his Siberian comrades, but he was still far from “towering over his opponents.” Now he would have to consolidate the position he had won by showing he could produce ideas capable of gener-
MARCH

ating an enthusiastic following in the party and among the workers. The pages of Pravda during the next few weeks throw a searching light on the question of how well he rose to that challenge. As that evidence shows, Stalin's appetite for power had far outstripped his capacity to generate ideas and policies keyed to the demands of the revolutionary situation.

Stalin as a Member of the Editorial Board of Pravda

Between March 14, when Stalin's first signed article appeared in Pravda, and March 28, the date of his last contribution before Lenin's return, Stalin published six short articles and one editorial in Pravda, all but one of which he signed "K. [for Koba, his old revolutionary pseudonym] Stalin." Chronologically the articles fall into two distinct groups: four were published almost daily between the fourteenth and eighteenth, skipping only issue number nine on March 15 (the date of Pravda's announcement of the triple promotion affecting Stalin), then a week's hiatus, followed by a group of three on March 25, 26, and 28. (If Stalin took a day of rest on Sunday the twenty-sixth, that would account for his absence from the columns of the newspaper on the twenty-seventh.)

In terms of content, too, there is a distinct break between the two groups of articles. The first four deal with some of the basic issues confronting the party—the Soviets of Workers' Deputies, the war, the Provisional Government—while the second group is concerned primarily with the national question and its implications for the future state form of Russia, an important topic, to be sure, but one peripheral to the party's central concerns at the time.

In searching for an explanation of this pattern, one notes that the week-long silence on Stalin's part coincides with an event of cardinal importance for the party, for the editorial board of Pravda, and for Stalin personally. This was the receipt by the board of the first of a series of letters from Lenin in Zurich analyzing the progress and prospects of the revolution on the basis of the scanty reports available to him in the Western press. It was on March 19 that Aleksandra Kollontai brought the first two of these "Letters from Afar" into the Pravda editorial office where Kamenev and Stalin were ensconced. Two days later Pravda published Lenin's first letter, but not in full: nearly one-fifth of the text had been cut by the editors to bring it more nearly into line with the policies they considered it proper for Pravda to pursue and to obscure the fact that Lenin's position differed radically from their own. The remaining three "Letters from Afar" seem to have
drifted into the Pravda office at irregular intervals. (Lenin wrote the first four in a burst of activity from March 7 to 12, then, preoccupied by the concerns attendant on his return to Russia, let two weeks elapse before starting the fifth, on March 26, just before the final arrangements for the sealed train were completed.) The editorial board of Pravda (read: Kamenev and Stalin) dealt even more cavalierly with Lenin's second letter than they had with the first: they simply consigned it to the archives, where it remained unpublished until after Lenin's death. It appears that the remaining three letters failed to reach Petrograd. By the time Lenin arrived in person, on April 3, they had been overtaken by events.

According to the Soviet historian I. I. Mints, the first two “Letters from Afar” were delivered to the Pravda office by A. M. Kollontai on March 19. At the time of the first publication of letters 2-5 in 1924, Kamenev asserted that letters 2-4 (and presumably the later, unfinished letter number 5) were not received at the Pravda office in 1917. According to Mints, it has been established that letters 3-5 were sent by Lenin to Ya. S. Ganetski (Hanecki) in Stockholm on March 12. Mints does not, however, assert that these letters reached the editors of Pravda at the time.21

The seven-day break in Stalin's writing for Pravda, taken in conjunction with his turn away from topics of major importance, provides ground for the surmise that it was his reading of Lenin's first “Letter from Afar” that drove him into temporary silence, and then into an avoidance of high-risk subjects. Thus for Stalin the encounter with Lenin's ideas and personality, which was to be decisive for his behavior in the revolution, began not on April 3, when Lenin made his physical entrance into Petrograd, but on March 19 when his uncompromising, insistent, and deeply disquieting (for Stalin) voice reached the Pravda office in the form of the first two “Letters from Afar.” Still strongly under the influence of Kamenev and his friends in the Executive Committee of the Soviet, Stalin seems to have had difficulty at first in grasping the outlines of Lenin's radical vision of the future course of the revolution and Bolshevik prospects in it. For Stalin, the period of rethinking which began on March 19 eventually led him to accept Lenin's vision. It would take him almost exactly a month to complete the process of mental conversion, a month during which we can observe Stalin cautiously feeling his way, clinging to the familiar Kamenev-Menshevik policies, then gradually realizing the greater opportunities opened to him personally, as well as to the party, by Lenin's radical vision.

22
Stalin on the Soviets

Stalin’s first contribution to Pravda, an article entitled “The Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies,” appeared in the March 14 issue and was therefore probably written on the thirteenth, the day after his return. Considering the short time that this gave him to orient himself, the article can be judged a creditable effort, lacking neither in originality nor in a bold if confused vision of the future prospects of the revolution. In the article Stalin showed that he had already grasped the fact that Petrograd, where the revolution broke out, had forged far ahead of the rest of Russia:

Now, as always, Petrograd is in the forefront. Behind it, stumbling at times, trail the immense provinces.

Stalin also recognized that the victory of the revolution had not yet been fully consolidated and that it faced the danger of counterrevolution:

The forces of the old power are crumbling, but they are not yet destroyed. They are only lying low, waiting for a favorable moment to raise their head and fling themselves on free Russia.

 Destruction of the old forces, an alliance between the revolutionary capital and the awakening provinces, and the “further advance” of the revolution were defined by Stalin as “the next immediate task of the proletariat in the capital.” Using his favorite device of posing rhetorical questions, Stalin asked, “But how is this to be done? What is needed to achieve this?” His answer was to strengthen the temporary “alliance between the workers and the peasants clad in soldiers’ uniform.”

For it is clear to all [another of Stalin’s favorite rhetorical devices] that the guarantee of the final victory of the Russian revolution lies in consolidating the alliance between the revolutionary workers and the revolutionary soldiers.

Fortunately for the revolution, the “organs of this alliance,” Stalin asserted, were already present in the form of the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. Now it was necessary to “weld” the soviets more closely together and “organize” them. “Revolutionary Social-Democrats,” Stalin urged,

must work to consolidate these Soviets, form them everywhere, and link them together under a Central Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies as the organ of revolutionary power of the people.
Workers, close your ranks and rally around the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party!

Peasants, organize in peasant unions and rally around the revolutionary proletariat, the leader of the Russian revolution!

Soldiers, organize in unions of your own and gather around the Russian people, the only true ally of the Russian revolutionary army!

To close his article on a ringing note, Stalin resorted to a stripped-down version of the minimum demands of the socialist parties, which he called "the fundamental demands of the Russian people":

land for the peasants, protection of labor for the workers, and a democratic republic for all the citizens of Russia!

As a first effort, the article has some merits. It recognized that the revolution was not completed, that it faced the danger of counterrevolution, and that the soviets had already emerged as essential organs for its continuation and completion. One can also give Stalin a good mark for his adherence to the Bolshevik line in defining the proletariat as the leading force in the revolution. But the weaknesses and omissions of the article far outweigh its modest strengths; as Carr says, it "was less remarkable for what was said than for what was omitted." Among its principal omissions Carr lists the Provisional Government and the war, but it can be urged in Stalin's defense that the article's subject was, after all, the soviets; that it was brief; and that Stalin would shortly turn his attention to exactly those subjects whose omission Carr criticizes.

Much more astonishing than the omissions to which Carr calls attention, however, are other omissions and blunders in the article. First and most surprisingly, Stalin seemed to have forgotten that a single Russian Social-Democratic party no longer existed; that the party had split as far back as 1903; and that he, Stalin, had committed himself to the Bolshevik fraction, since 1912 a self-proclaimed independent organization. The article repeatedly refers to a Social-Democratic party around which the workers are urged to rally. The author seems ignorant not only of the Bolshevik party's separate existence but of its claim to speak on behalf of the poor and landless peasants. The article calls on an undifferentiated peasantry to "rally around the revolutionary proletariat," just as though the Bolsheviks had made no effort to speak directly to and on behalf of the poor peasants. As to the soldiers, their rallying point, in the author's view, should be "the Russian people" (narod), an appeal not only strikingly un-Marxist in its failure to distinguish between various socioeconomic categories but also a grotesque distortion of the ethnic complexities of
the Russian Empire, a blunder especially surprising in a writer whose chief claim to attention in the party's literary activities up to that point had been his essay on "Marxism and the National Question."

Given the fact that the subject of the article is the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, it is astonishing that the author nowhere mentions the existing Petrograd Soviet nor makes any attempt to define the relationship he envisages between that already flourishing body and the hypothetical "Central Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies," which he evokes as "the organ of revolutionary power of the people."

Finally, the article defines the goal of all this revolutionary activity in singularly mild and nonsocialist terms: "protection of labor" is all the workers can look forward to (protection against whom? The implication is that the capitalist system will still be flourishing when the "fundamental demands of the Russian people" have been met). The Constituent Assembly is another of the article's striking omissions; somehow, in a manner the author never explains, a "democratic republic" will be established "for all the citizens of Russia." Although the terms are vague, the implication is clear: as Deutscher points out, these words show that in Stalin's mind

the revolution was still to be anti-feudal, but not anti-capitalist; it was to be "bourgeois democratic," not socialist.24

Along with its modest strengths and startling weaknesses, Stalin's first published article in 1917 is noteworthy for its brief but suggestive anticipation of a much later war, when Stalin would appear not as an inexperienced and confused journalist but as the mighty and unchallenged leader of a Russia fighting for its survival. In the appeal to the soldiers to "gather around the Russian people, the only true ally of the Russian revolutionary army," one catches an uncanny prefiguration of Stalin's victory toast "to the Russian people" in May 1945 as the basic source of support for the army and the true guarantor of Russia's survival in World War II.

Stalin was a slow learner, and this first article shows how much he still had to learn in mid-March 1917, but he had a tenacious memory, and the echoes of his 1917 experience can be detected in his writings and speeches of World War II.

Stalin Tackles the Question of the War

For his second signed contribution to Pravda, an article entitled "The War," Stalin turned to a subject that had already proved highly divisive within the socialist movement and that was to constitute one of
the chief points of conflict between the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government. The Soviet had just heard a report from General Lavr Kornilov, commander of troops of the Petrograd Military District, to the effect that the Germans were planning an offensive against Russia. In response, two prominent bourgeois political figures, Alexander Rodzyanko and Mikhail Guchkov, had appealed to the army and the people to fight the war to the end.

It was this appeal that formed the subject of Stalin's article. His principal argument was that revolutionary Russia in 1917, unlike revolutionary France in 1792, was not endangered by a coalition of enemy powers. "The present war is an imperialist war," Stalin maintained, whose principal aim is "the seizure (annexation) of foreign, chiefly agrarian territories by capitalistically developed states." Given that definition of the character and war aims of the belligerent powers, Stalin argued,

The present war is not, and cannot lead necessarily to interference in the internal affairs of the territories annexed, in the sense of restoring their old regimes.

Thus,

the present situation of Russia provides no warrant for sounding the alarm and proclaiming: "Liberty is in danger! Long live the war!"

The real aims of the "Russian imperialists," Stalin asserted, are "the Straits and Persia." He cited with approval the "anti-war resolutions of the Zimmerwald and Kienthal Socialist Congresses of 1915–1916," neglecting, however, to mention that both these left-wing socialist gatherings had failed to endorse Lenin's uncompromising rejection of any justification for support of the war whatsoever, along with his demand for "turning the imperialist war into a civil war." Support of the Zimmerwald and Kienthal congresses' position was the furthest Stalin was prepared to go, a fact that conclusively demolishes any claim that he had supported Lenin's stand on the war while in Siberian exile.

In answer to his customary rhetorical questions, "What should be our attitude, as a party, to the present war? What are the practical ways and means capable of leading to the speediest termination of the war?" Stalin brusquely rejected Lenin's antiwar stand, as well as that of the Vyborg Raion Committee, and asserted that it is "unquestionable"

that the stark slogan, "Down with the war!" is absolutely unsuitable as a practical means, because . . . it does not and cannot provide anything
capable of exerting practical influence on the belligerent forces to compel them to stop the war.

Faced with the challenge from Kornilov, the Petrograd Soviet at its March 14 session had adopted an appeal to all the peoples of the world urging them to force their governments to end the war. One “cannot but welcome this appeal,” Stalin wrote, but he felt it alone would “not lead directly to the goal,” especially since, in his view, it was far from certain that the German people could overthrow their “semi-absolutist regime.”

Stalin’s solution—identical to that of the Menshevik-SR leadership in the Soviet, as Trotsky later pointed out—was to bring pressure on the Provisional Government to make it declare its consent to start peace negotiations immediately. The workers, soldiers and peasants must arrange meetings and demonstrations and demand that the Provisional Government shall come out openly and publicly in an effort to induce all the warring powers to start peace negotiations immediately, on the basis of the recognition of the right of nations to self-determination.

When this article was later reprinted, Stalin, faced with the embarrassing need to justify his divergence from Lenin on the question of the war, admitted that in “The War” he had adopted “a profoundly mistaken position,” since it sowed pacifist illusions, contributed to the position of defencism and impeded the revolutionary education of the masses.

What he failed to mention, however, was that the 1917 article showed no awareness of the fact that Lenin had drawn a sharp line between his position and that of all other socialist parties and groups. Also unmentioned was the fact that the February 27 manifesto issued by the Russian Bureau had staked out a position much more sharply opposed to the war and much closer to that of Lenin. Again, as in his first article, one is struck by the extent to which Stalin, in “The War,” showed himself ignorant of Bolshevik policy on a key issue, as defined by Lenin.

A short, unsigned article, “Bidding for Ministerial Portfolios,” which Stalin contributed to Pravda on March 17, amounts to little more than an extended footnote to “The War.” It takes the form of a commentary on several resolutions passed a few days earlier by a group calling itself “Yedinstvo” (unity), organized and led by the veteran Russian Marxist G. V. Plekhanov. In its resolutions the Yedinstvo group called for “participation of the working class democracy in the Provisional Government” and continuation of the war by
the proletariat, among other reasons, in order “to deliver Europe from the menace of Austro-German reaction.”

Again Stalin identified his stand on the war as that of the Social Democratic party as defined by the Zimmerwald and Kienthal resolutions, against defensism and against participation in the Provisional Government. On that basis Stalin rejected the Yedinstvo group’s appeal for unity among the different groups and parties of socialists. But he implicitly accepted the idea of an alliance or merger between the Bolsheviks and other socialists on the basis of the Zimmerwald-Kienthal position.

“The War” and “Bidding for Ministerial Portfolios” provide a valuable clue to Stalin’s associations and the source of his ideas in the first week after his return to Petrograd. Both articles reflect the gossip and intellectual interchange characteristic of the Executive Committee of the Soviet, to which Stalin had been appointed on the fourteenth. The articles give no indication, on the other hand, that Stalin had been absorbing or sharing a Bolshevik outlook. The whole thrust of the Muranov-Kamenev-Stalin party coup had been to elbow aside the previously dominant Bolshevik leadership and discredit its line on the problems facing the party. Caught up in the bureaucratic talk-shop that the Executive Committee was rapidly becoming, Stalin unconsciously parroted the ideas characteristic of that milieu. It would be pointless to search for the source of Stalin’s ideas as of mid-March 1917 in his earlier writings; the bitter years of exile in Siberia had in effect wiped his mind clean of the accumulated intellectual baggage of the preceding decade and a half of revolutionary activity and had made him susceptible to the nearest intellectual guidepost, provided it seemed to point in the direction of power. And to Stalin in March 1917 the Executive Committee of the Soviet appeared to offer a much more direct path to power than the small, faction-ridden, and contentious Russian Bureau of the Bolshevik party. With his position on the editorial board of Pravda secure and his foot in the door of the Executive Committee, Stalin obviously felt this was not the moment to stress the irreconcilability of the Bolshevik position.

Member of the Executive Committee

Stalin’s reception by his fellow Bolsheviks in the Russian Bureau had been cool in the extreme, and the brusque manner in which, with Muranov’s and Kamenev’s help, he had overcome that setback caused a feeling of bitterness among those he had pushed aside which still rankled years later. In the Executive Committee of the Soviet, in
contrast, Stalin encountered a warm welcome from his fellow Georgians, including the Mensheviks Nikolai Chkheidze, president of the Soviet, and Iraklii Tseretelli, its leading theorist.29

It might be supposed that Stalin would have used the opportunity of his appointment to the Executive Committee of the Soviet to raise a staunchly Bolshevik voice in that forum dominated by the Mensheviks and the SR's. The reality, however, was quite different. For Stalin the Executive Committee proved a welcome haven where he could rub elbows with the rising politicians of the new phase of the revolution and absorb their point of view. Trotsky gives a hostile but essentially accurate characterization of Stalin's role in the Executive Committee:

There has not remained in the minutes or in the press a single proposal, declaration or protest in which Stalin in any distinguishable manner counterposed the Bolshevik point of view to the flunkeyism of the "revolutionary democracy" toward the bourgeoisie.30

Trotsky then quotes what is arguably the single most famous image of Stalin in the revolution:

Among the Bolsheviks, besides Kamenev, there appeared in the Executive Committee of the Soviet in these days Stalin. During his modest activity in the Executive Committee [he] gave us the impression—and not only us—of a grey blur which would sometimes emit a dim and inconsequential light. There is really nothing more to be said about him.31

The "grey blur" passage has been widely quoted, sometimes as a kind of blanket characterization of Stalin's participation not merely in the Executive Committee but in the revolution in general. Of course, it was not meant to be read in this sweeping way and should not be used for this purpose.32

Stalin on the Prospects of the Revolution

By the time Stalin's fourth article, "Conditions for the Victory of the Russian Revolution," appeared in Pravda, he had had time to form a coherent general picture of the future prospects of the revolution, the dangers it faced, and the steps that, in his opinion, it must take to head off those dangers.33 It was a picture identical in all important aspects to that of the "revolutionary democracy" as represented in the Executive Committee of the Soviet. There was nothing specifically Bolshevik about it, and much in it with which Lenin was bound to disagree violently.
Again, as in “The War,” Stalin asserted the existence of a split between revolutionary Petrograd and the “inertia” of the provinces, a split that he believed found its expression in the “dual power,”

that actual division of power between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies.

The former he called “an organ of the moderate bourgeoisie,” the latter “an organ of revolutionary struggle of the workers and soldiers.”

Ignoring the fact that Moscow had already gone over to the side of the revolution, Stalin asserted that the split he saw between Petrograd and the rest of Russia (“the provinces”) represented both a danger to the revolution, insofar as it was a source of weakness, and an opportunity, since the provinces, following Petrograd’s lead, were shaking off their inertia and “are being revolutionized.” What was needed, Stalin declared, was

an all-Russian organ of revolutionary struggle of the democracy of all Russia, one authoritative enough to weld together the democracy of the capital and the provinces and to transform itself at the required moment from an organ of revolutionary struggle of the people into an organ of revolutionary power, which will mobilize all the vital forces of the people against counter-revolution. Only an all-Russian Soviet of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies can be such an organ.

Here, as in his first article, Stalin advocated an idea that had no visible support in the population and formed part of no party’s platform. Like the alleged problem it was designed to solve, the “all-Russian Soviet” was a figment of Stalin’s imagination and simply showed the enormous distance that still separated him from both political realism and Bolshevik orthodoxy. Yet one must not be too harsh in judging this work. Stalin’s all-Russian soviet never got off the ground, but it bears a recognizable kinship to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets in whose name the Bolsheviks did in fact take power eight months later. Stalin rightly saw that soviets of workers’ deputies were being formed in what he called the provinces, together with peasants’ and soldiers’ “unions,” but he had not yet grasped the possibility of a nationwide network of soviets drawn together and crowned by an all-Russian congress. The idea of a network of soviets had been formulated in the late months of 1905 during the revolution of that year, but in the swift pace of events, which saw the revolution crushed along with the December Armed Uprising in Moscow, the idea failed to reach the stage of embodiment. Even had someone recalled the 1905 experience, no one in March 1917 could have foreseen the way in which the establishment of an all-Russian congress of soviets would
be dovetailed with the uprising that carried the Bolsheviks to power in October.

Stalin’s second condition for the victory of the revolution was the establishment of a workers’ guard, “the immediate arming of the workers.” His reasoning here was that the regular army had already acquired “the character of a people’s army,” a fact that explained “the comparative ease with which the revolution broke out and triumphed in our country.” Stalin was greatly exaggerating the degree to which the army had been radicalized, just as he appeared ignorant of the difference between the troops of the Petrograd garrison, whose support for the insurgent workers had made possible the victory of the February Revolution, and the soldiers in the field army, the great majority of whom still respected military discipline and were prepared to honor their commitment to the legally established government, tsarist or provisional. As an essay in the weighing of military capabilities, “Conditions for the Victory of the Russian Revolution” reflects scant credit on its author, the future generalissimo.

Equally weak was the logic behind Stalin’s third condition, the early convocation of a constituent assembly. Here Stalin simply adopted one of the stock proposals in the arsenal of “revolutionary democracy,” one to which even the Bolsheviks still paid lip service. Generations of Russian revolutionaries had regarded the convocation of a constituent assembly as the crowning achievement that would ultimately reward their efforts, giving the Russian people the opportunity to define the future form of their state and society once and for all. But Stalin apparently forgot that he had just called for the establishment of an all-Russian soviet of workers’, soldiers’, and peasants’ deputies and its transformation into an organ of revolutionary power as the first condition for the victory of the revolution. What was to be the relationship between this super-soviet and the Constituent Assembly, described by Stalin as “the only institution which will enjoy authority in the eyes of all sections of society”? He offered no explanation, nor could he have, for there was an unbridgeable gulf between his first and third conditions.

Almost as an afterthought Stalin added a “general condition for all these necessary measures”:

the opening of peace negotiations as soon as possible and the termination of this inhuman war.

Again betraying complete disregard for Lenin’s writings on the war, Stalin called continuation of the war “that submerged reef on which the ship of revolution may be wrecked.” In actual fact, however, it was the Provisional Government, not the revolution, that was to be
wrecked on the continuation of the war: for the Bolsheviks, as Lenin
was quick to perceive, continuation of the war provided the party
with its best opportunity for a bid for power, by exhausting its oppo-
nents and discrediting its rivals.

Pravda Edits Lenin

Between the first group of Stalin's contributions to Pravda and the
second, as we have seen, there was a week's silence, during which we
are deprived of the opportunity to observe at first hand the evolution
of his thinking. It was in that week, however, that the editors of
Pravda, particularly Kamenev and Stalin, were confronted with a
formidable challenge in the form of at least one, possibly two letters
from Lenin, written on March 7 and 9, which Kollontai brought to
the Pravda office on March 19.

Reading the first “Letter from Afar” in the context of Stalin's
contributions to the March 1917 Pravda, one cannot fail to be im-
pressed with the broad sweep of Lenin's ideas, the vigor of their
expression, and the boldness of his perspective. At a time when
Stalin, already on the scene in Petrograd, was feeling his way cau-
tiously and awkwardly, Lenin, still far from Russia, showed the ability
to grasp the essential elements of the situation; to locate the February
Revolution in a coherent framework of time, dating back to the Revo-
lution of 1905-7, and of place, ranging over the entire array of bellig-
erent and war-weary powers; and to lay down the main points of the
strategy the Bolshevik party would follow to victory eight months
later. With slashing strokes Lenin drew a devastating picture of the
Provisional Government, at a time when Kamenev and Stalin were
urging its conditional support. The Provisional Government, Lenin
wrote,

cannot give peace because it is a government for war, a government for the
continuation of the imperialist slaughter, a government of conquest. . . . It
cannot give bread because it is a bourgeois government. . . . It cannot give
freedom, since it is a government of landowners and capitalists, who are
afraid of the people.

Lenin defined the current situation as “a period of transition from the
first stage of the revolution to the second” and identified the allies of
the revolution as, first, “the broad masses of the semi-proletarian and,
partly, the petty peasant population of Russia,” and second, “the
proletariat of the warring countries and of all countries in general.”
With the aid of these allies, he confidently predicted,
the proletariat of Russia can and will proceed on to win, first, a democratic republic and the victory of the peasantry over the landlords, then Socialism, which alone can give peace, bread, and freedom to the peoples exhausted by the war.

Faced with this blast of molten intellectual power, Kamenev and Stalin temporized. To shut out the letter altogether would be too direct a repudiation of Lenin's leadership, yet to print it in full would jeopardize the comfortable working relationship they had established with other members of the "revolutionary democracy" by their redirection of Bolshevik policy since March 12. The solution they found was a makeshift one: they printed roughly four-fifths of Lenin's text, but cut out his more scathing references to the Provisional Government and the Menshevik leaders in the Soviet, leaders whose good opinion they valued and with whom they had reached a general understanding of the needs of the moment.

With regard to Lenin's second "Letter"—assuming that it actually was delivered by Kollontai on March 19 and that Kamenev's 1924 denial of that event was the result either of a lapse of memory or, more probably, of embarrassment—the editors took the more drastic step of suppressing it entirely, consigning it to the files from which it emerged only after Lenin's death some seven years later.

As for Stalin, he showed his awareness of the arrival of Lenin's "Letters" by his characteristic response of silent withdrawal in the face of a new challenge: for a week he wrote nothing for Pravda, and when his contributions were resumed, on March 25, his subject was the comparatively safe one of the national problem and the future state form of Russia. The outcome of this first encounter between Lenin and Stalin in 1917 was thus one that provides little useful copy to the future manufacturers of the legend of Stalin as Lenin's closest collaborator and most faithful supporter in 1917. Always uneasy in the presence of intellectual power, and none too sure of his own position, Stalin preferred to give his cautious support to the nearby and reasonable Kamenev rather than to the still distant and incalculable Lenin.

Stalin on the National Problem

While he was in Siberian exile—or so he later claimed—Stalin wrote an article on the question of national minorities in a multinational state such as Russia. The article, entitled "Cultural-National Autonomy," was allegedly completed by February 1916. In the chronology of Stalin's life included in volume 2 of his Works it is stated that on February 5, 1916, he wrote a letter to "the Party centre abroad"
concerning the article, and on February 25 he sent a second letter to the same address, to be transmitted by Inessa Armand, in which he inquired about the article “which he has sent abroad.”

In her memoirs published in 1946 Anna Allilueva stated that her father, Sergei Alliluev, forwarded the manuscript at Stalin’s request to Lenin, but there is no evidence that it reached him, nor has it been published. A Soviet scholar, M. A. Moskalev, writing in 1947, claimed that the manuscript was intercepted by the tsarist censor and confiscated and that it was still preserved in the Okhrana file in the Krasnoyarsk district. That would explain why it never reached Lenin, but raises the more serious question why it was not included in Stalin’s Works, the second volume of which ends with an article written in early 1913 and the third volume of which opens with Stalin’s Pravda article on the soviets written shortly after his return to Petrograd in March 1917. There is thus an awkward four-year gap in the official record of Stalin’s writings, which a carefully thought out and well-prepared essay on the national question would do a great deal to fill.

The conflicting evidence provides a basis for various hypotheses. First, the article may simply never have been written. In that case, the entries referring to it in the chronology of volume 2 of Stalin’s Works must have been falsified, along with the memoir of Anna Allilueva and the book by Moskalev. Even though such a broad-scale effort at falsification is by no means inconceivable, it seems unlikely, since the witnesses agree that there was in fact an article while disagreeing on the details of its transmission. This lack of coordination sounds more like the normal discrepancies among sources than a well-orchestrated exercise in falsification. It is noteworthy that the evidence tends to cluster around the years 1946-47, when the editing of Stalin’s Works was in progress and the question of his activity in exile from 1913 to 1916 urgently demanded an answer. It seems inherently probable that Stalin, during the long and tedious years of exile, would have made an effort to continue his work on the national question, both because the subject was of genuine concern to him and because his first essay in that field had been favorably received by Lenin. On balance, therefore, it seems unlikely that the reports of the manuscript’s existence were falsified. Stalin did write something on the national question. What did it say, and what happened to it?

Some writers think it possible that the article did reach Lenin, and explain its nonpublication by its poor quality. Deutscher, for example, writes:

It [the article] was never published; either it was lost on the way or it was
not up to the standards of his [Stalin’s] previous work and did not please Lenin.\textsuperscript{37}

It would have been most uncharacteristic of Lenin, however, to destroy even an unsatisfactory article from a party member without recording its arrival or making some effort to get in touch with the author to elicit from him a better piece of work. Reasoning along these lines, Tucker has suggested a link between the missing article and two inquiries that Lenin made in 1915 in an effort to learn Stalin’s last name (Dzhugashvili), which he had forgotten.\textsuperscript{38} The first letter, written to Zinoviev, is undated but was written not later than July 23, 1915, according to the editors of the fifth edition of Lenin’s Works.\textsuperscript{39} In it Lenin inquires, “Do you remember the last name of Koba?”—Koba being the pseudonym by which Stalin was best known in the party before 1917.

In Lenin’s second request, in a letter to V. A. Karpinsky which the editors date “earlier than November 8 [1915],” the tone is more urgent:

A big request: find out (from Stepko or Mikha et al.) the last name of “Koba” (Iosif Dzh. . . . ?) We have forgotten. Very important.\textsuperscript{40}

(The two names Lenin gives as possible informants are party pseudonyms of Georgians living in emigration, N. D. Kinkadze and M. G. Tskhakaia, who could be expected to know the real name of their fellow Georgian.)

Tucker’s suggested link between these letters and the missing manuscript appears unlikely, however, since on the evidence of the chronology in volume 2 of Stalin’s Works, he did not send off the manuscript until February 1916, three months after Lenin’s second inquiry.

During the period when Lenin was trying to learn Stalin’s real name, he was engaged in an attempt to reestablish the Russian Bureau of the Central Committee, of which Stalin had been named a member in 1912. The last reference to a message from Stalin which occurs in Lenin’s pre-1917 correspondence is in a letter to Karpinsky dated August 1915, in which Lenin writes, “Koba sent greetings and the news that he is well.”\textsuperscript{41} Two days later Lenin wrote to Shlyapnikov that he considered it “extremely important” that the Russian Bureau should be reestablished.\textsuperscript{42} It was toward the middle of September (the editors date the letter “earlier than September 13”) that Lenin wrote to Shlyapnikov informing him that he had been co-opted to the Central Committee,\textsuperscript{43} the same action that had been taken in regard to Stalin in 1912, and for almost exactly the same reason—to organize (as of 1912) or reorganize (as of 1916) the Russian Bureau of the CC.
Shlyapnikov was unable to carry out this mission until his return to Russia in November 1915. It was apparently at just about this time that Lenin wrote the letter to Karpinsky in which he made his urgent request for Stalin's last name.

This evidence suggests that it was some problem in connection with the reestablishment of the Russian Bureau, not Stalin's manuscript on the national question, that prompted Lenin's attempt to learn Stalin's name. If his inquiries on that subject in summer and autumn 1915 cannot be linked with the missing article, it appears that there is no record in Lenin's correspondence of any trace of the manuscript or the correspondence concerning it.

There is an unbridgeable gap between Moskalev's testimony as to the manuscript's continuing existence in Krasnoyarsk as of 1947 and Anna Allilueva's assertion, in 1946, that her father sent it to Lenin. The negative evidence from Lenin's secretariat (maintained by the faithful Krupskaya) casts a strong shadow on Anna Allilueva's account. We are left with Moskalev, who believed that the manuscript was still extant. Why, then, did the editors of Stalin's Works pass up this golden opportunity to include an article by Stalin which would support his claim to having continued his party researches in exile? Possibly, one suspects, because its publication in 1946 would have done nothing to strengthen Stalin's claim as a theorist on the national question. That this may be the correct explanation is strongly suggested by two articles on the national question which Stalin contributed to Pravda in March 1917 and which presumably represent his mature thinking on the subject. The first article, "Abolition of National Disabilities," appeared on March 25; the second, "Against Federalism," followed three days later.

"Abolition of National Disabilities" opens with the confident assertion that the source of the oppression of national minorities is "the obsolescent landed aristocracy." In a rapid survey of world conditions, Stalin reveals his ignorance of social arrangements in a number of countries, beginning with "old Russia." There, says Stalin, at a time "when the old feudal landed aristocracy was in power" (when would that be? one wonders), "national oppression operated to the limit, not infrequently taking the form of pogroms (of Jews) and massacres (Armenian-Tatar)." Passing rapidly over England, where he sees a rule shared between the landed aristocracy and the bourgeoisie with a correspondingly mild form of national oppression, Stalin moves on to Switzerland and what he calls "North America" (evidently meaning the United States), where idyllic conditions prevail: since "landlordism has never existed" in those countries and "the bourgeoisie enjoys undivided power."
the nationalities develop more or less freely, and, generally speaking, there is practically no ground for national oppression.

For Stalin, evidently, the Negroes and Indians of "North America" simply do not exist.

On this naive and ill-informed basis Stalin proceeds to erect an equally unsound general principle:

Thus the way to put an end to national oppression and to create the actual conditions necessary for political liberty is to drive the feudal aristocracy from the political stage, to wrest the power from its hands.

Returning to Russia, Stalin takes as his premise the full victory of the revolution:

Inasmuch as the Russian revolution has triumphed [!], it has already created these actual conditions, having overthrown the power of the feudal serfowners [NB: serfdom was in fact abolished in 1861] and established liberty.

All that remains, in Stalin's view, is to safeguard these newly won rights by "(1) defin[ing] the rights of the nationalities emancipated from oppression," and "(2) confirm[ing] them by legislation." This brings him to the Provisional Government's decree, just enacted, abolishing legal and social inequalities on the basis of nationality, the terms of which he summarizes and to which he extends a guarded approval: "This is all very good."

But there are several steps that must still be taken, Stalin warns, "to guarantee national liberty." First, the government's decree fails to specify that national minorities may use their own language rather than Russian in schools and public institutions such as parliaments; second—and here at last, one feels, Stalin shows some awareness of the real issues underlying the national problem—it is necessary to adopt "a positive program which will guarantee the elimination of national oppression." Two principles must be proclaimed: (1) political autonomy (Stalin stresses that he does not mean federation)

for regions representing integral economic territories, possessing a specific way of life and populations of a specific national composition . . .

and

. . . (2) the right of self-determination for such nations as cannot, for one reason or another, remain within the framework of the integral state.

Only in the final sentence does Stalin remember something of his training as a Marxist:
This is the way towards the real abolition of national oppression and towards guaranteeing the nationalities the maximum liberty possible under capitalism.

One is reminded of Trotsky's caustic characterization of the article—"this hopelessly provincial analysis"—and his fully justified condemnation of Stalin as a theorist:

In theory he [Stalin] had not moved forward since the beginning of the century; more than that, he seemed to have entirely forgotten his own work on the national question, written early in 1913 under Lenin's direction.

When Stalin returned to the national question a few days later, he took as his point of departure an article by one Jos. Okulich in the SR newspaper, Delo naroda, entitled "Russia—a Union of Regions." In line with SR thinking on the problem, Okulich proposed the conversion of Russia into a federal state in which the Ukraine, Georgia, Turkestan, and so forth would each enjoy "internal sovereignty" in a federal union analogous to what the author believed the American colonies had created in 1776. The central government in this proposal would retain control of the army, the currency, foreign policy, and the supreme court, but otherwise

the various regions of the single state [would] be free to build their new life independently.

Granting that the article was "interesting, ... original [and] intriguing," Stalin dismissed it as "a peculiar piece of muddleheadedness," due to "its more than frivolous history of the United States of America (as well as of Switzerland and Canada)." Stalin then proceeded to set Okulich straight on his U.S. history, which he depicted as a transition from the "confederation of what until then were independent colonies, or states," in 1776, to the "federation" that was established as the result of the victory of the northern states in the Civil War. This governmental structure, Stalin asserted, proved "intolerable," and

in the course of its further evolution the United States was transformed from a federation into a unitary (integral) state, with uniform constitutional provisions and the limited autonomy (not governmental, but political-administrative) permitted to the states by these provisions.

Only in name could the present-day United States be described as a federal union of states, in Stalin's view:

The name "federation" as applied to the United States became an empty
word, a relic of the past which had long since ceased to correspond to the actual state of affairs.

The evolution of state form took a similar course in Canada and Switzerland, according to Stalin:

The development was from independent regions, through their federation, to a unitary state.

It followed that

the trend of development is not in favor of federation, but against it. Federation is a transitional form, [the reason being that] ... the development of capitalism in its higher forms, with the concomitant expansion of the economic territory, and its trend towards centralization, demands not a federal but a unitary form of state.

Since this was the clear trend of history, Stalin argued,

it follows from this that in Russia it would be unwise to work for a federation, which is doomed by the very realities of life to disappear.

Following a recapitulation of his reasons for rejecting Okulich's analogy between Russia in 1917 and the United States in 1776, Stalin offered his own "solution to the national problem," which he called "as practicable as it is radical and final." It combined two principles (and here Stalin did, pace Trotsky, show that he had not entirely forgotten his 1913 essay):

(1) The right of secession for the nations inhabiting certain regions of Russia who cannot remain, or who do not desire to remain, within the integral framework; (2) Political autonomy within the framework of the single (integral) state, with uniform constitutional provisions, for regions which have a specific national composition and which remain within the national framework.

In December 1924, less than a year after Lenin's death, when plans were launched for reprinting this essay in a collection of documents on the 1917 revolution, Stalin felt it advisable to add an explanatory note. In general the reason for Stalin's later embarrassment in regard to his 1917 writings was that he had failed to align himself with Lenin's position on various issues. Here, on the contrary, Stalin for once could show that in early 1917 his rejection of a federal solution for Russia's future state form was good Leninism at that time. He was able to cite a letter from Lenin to Shaumian in November 1913 in which Lenin categorically asserted,

We stand for democratic centralism unreservedly. ... We are opposed to
federation in principle—it weakens economic ties, and is unsuitable for what is one state.49

Only with Lenin’s August 1917 work, “State and Revolution,” said Stalin, did

the Party, in the person of Lenin, [make] the first serious step towards recognition of the permissibility of federation, as a transitional form “to a centralized republic.”50

Thus, for once Stalin was in the happy position of being able to explain away his “mistakes” of March 1917 on the ground that he had simply been following Lenin’s position as then defined. (Wisely, Stalin made no attempt to foist onto Lenin the faulty historical data on the basis of which he, Stalin, had tried to justify his opposition to federalism.)

More was involved, however, than a mere matter of correcting a position taken at the outset of the revolution and long since modified. Underlying Stalin’s discomfort in 1924 may well have been his still fresh memories of the bruising and bitter struggle he had waged against Lenin over exactly this question, and the sharp reprimand he had received from Lenin for his harsh centralizing policies, as commissar of nationalities, in curbing the autonomy of national minority regions, including Georgia. If the March 1917 article had been reprinted without explanation in 1924, it would have reminded knowledgeable party members all too forcibly that the centralizing tendencies expressed in “Against Federalism” had reflected Stalin’s real convictions, which motivated his later policies, policies that had earned Lenin’s condemnation. Thus the author’s note of December 1924 is really an act of self-justification, not of self-criticism, as it would appear to be on the surface; in it Stalin is really saying, “The position I took in March 1917 may have been mistaken, but if so the mistake was Lenin’s, not mine.”

Stalin Calls for Milyukov’s Resignation

Perhaps the most effective article contributed by Stalin to Pravda in March 1917 was a brief commentary, “Either—Or,” published on March 23, which dealt with an interview given by Paul Milyukov, foreign minister in the Provisional Government and leader of the Constitutional Democrat (KD, Cadet) party.51 Although it was unsigned, the article is included in Stalin’s Works and has apparently not aroused any suspicion among scholars as to its authenticity. If the attribution to Stalin is valid, the article helps strengthen his reputation as a perceptive and alert political observer.
In the interview Milyukov had defined Russia’s war aims as embracing a number of traditional tsarist territorial goals: Constantinople and Turkish Armenia from Turkey, Galicia from Austria-Hungary, and northern Persia. In view of the flagrant discrepancy between these imperialist aims and the Petrograd Soviet’s manifesto calling for an immediate end to the war “without annexations or indemnities,” Alexander Kerensky, minister of justice in the Provisional Government, thought it wise to issue an announcement to the effect that Milyukov’s statement represented his personal opinion, not that of the Provisional Government.

Shrewdly, the author of “Either—Or” impaled Milyukov on the horns of an awkward constitutional dilemma. As a liberal political figure in the State Duma, Milyukov had repeatedly demanded that ministers in the tsar’s government must be held accountable to the Duma. (Under the Fundamental Laws of 1906, the tsar alone had the power to appoint or dismiss ministers, and while the Duma might discuss their conduct and criticize their policies, it could not demand their resignation.) Now, as the writer pointed out, Milyukov, having himself become a minister in the Provisional Government, had been disavowed by a spokesman for that government. Either Milyukov must resign in accordance with his own principles, or Kerensky’s statement of disavowal was untrue,

in which case the revolutionary people must call the Provisional Government to order and compel it to recognize its will.

Milyukov’s rash interview had thus caused a flareup that cast a revealing light on the real power relationships of Russian politics: in the Provisional Government Kerensky, though only one of several ministers, was already assuming responsibility for defining the policy of the entire government. Meanwhile, the Provisional Government itself enjoyed power only “insofar as” it continued to earn the grudging approval of the Petrograd Soviet, a fact of which Kerensky, as his announcement showed, was well aware.

To have perceived all this promptly and to have formulated it concisely reflects credit on Stalin, assuming he was the author of the unsigned article. If he was in fact the author, one wonders why he did not sign the article, or at least append his initials. Either (as Stalin would have said) the other members of Pravda’s editorial board (Kamenev especially) disliked the sharp tone of the article and its shrewd thrusts at Kerensky and the Provisional Government, and insisted that the article must appear anonymously, or (and this appears less probable) the position taken in the article represented the consensus of the editorial board, including Kamenev, and its appearance with-
out identification was thus meant to signify that it spoke for the editorial board as a whole. Either Stalin was by now developing his own independent and penetrating political insights, or he had integrated himself so well with his colleagues that he could speak on their behalf.

One other possibility merits consideration: that the article was based on a general view prevailing in the Executive Committee of the Soviet, where the original interview, Kerensky’s disavowal, and the Soviet’s recently passed manifesto on the war were all bound to arouse the most intense interest. If that was the case, the author’s anonymity might be a prudent calculation that would conform to some known attributes of Stalin’s personality: the bolder the stroke, the more desirable to avoid personal identification, in case the sally proved too risky.

Whatever the correct explanation may be, and whoever the author was (let us assume it was Stalin), the article correctly identified a source of conflict which would shortly cause the first major crisis in the Provisional Government.

The author of “Either—Or” shared with other Bolsheviks the belief that the question of war aims was of fundamental importance, but his position was much more moderate than that of the Russian Bureau of the CC (of which Stalin was a member), as set forth in a resolution adopted by the bureau on March 22 and published in the same issue of Pravda which included “Either—Or.” The resolution took a position closely resembling that of Lenin and may, in fact, have been influenced by the first two “Letters from Afar,” which were received in Petrograd on March 19. The resolution, as David Longley has pointed out, states

(1) that the Provisional Government cannot solve the tasks of the revolution; (2) that the soviets are the embryo of the new power which at a given moment in the development of the revolution will implement the demand of the people in revolt; (3) in the meantime the Petrograd Soviet should keep a careful check on the government’s action and (4) consolidate the soviets and deepen the revolution by arming the whole people and creating a Red Guard.52

As Deutscher notes there is historical irony in the fact that Stalin in March 1917 sharply criticized Milyukov for expansionist war aims when “nearly thirty years later he himself would rehash some of Milyukov’s war aims.”53 Here, as in other instances, the biographer of Stalin receives the impression that for Stalin the two world wars formed parts of a single continuous experience, so that he often acted, during his years as Soviet war leader in 1941-45, along lines foreshadowed in 1917-18. Similarly, a connection could be drawn between the
rather oversimplified views on the nature of the war set forth by Stalin in his article “The War,” where he rules out the possibility of a war of national defense à la revolutionary France in 1792 on the ground that the war is, by definition, imperialist, and thus does not endanger the political gains of the revolution (since Germany and her allies were supposedly interested only in acquiring territory), and Stalin’s comment to Milovan Djilas in 1945, “This war is not like others.”

Stalin at the All-Russian Bolshevik Conference

The Russian Bureau’s resolutions of March 22 were drawn up in preparation for the first big Bolshevik gathering of the revolutionary era, an all-Russian conference held in Petrograd from March 27 to April 4. The conference, which opened at party headquarters in the Kshesinskaya mansion and then shifted to the Tauride Palace, former meeting place of the State Duma, overlapped with an all-Russian conference of soviets called on the initiative of the Petrograd Soviet, which opened on March 29 and closed on April 3.

Stalin’s growing stature as one of the top-ranking Bolsheviks in Petrograd was attested to by his assignment to deliver one of the principal reports, “On the Provisional Government,” at the March 29 session of the conference. The report showed the influences of Lenin’s first “Letter from Afar” in its analysis of the complex class-economic factors that had produced the February Revolution, with its characteristic creation of “two governments, two forces”—the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet. But Stalin was unwilling to endorse Lenin’s unequivocal demand for rejection of the Provisional Government; for Stalin, the Provisional Government had its positive sides, at least for the present:

The Provisional Government has in fact taken the role of fortifying the conquests of the revolutionary people.

But this situation was only temporary:

The bourgeois layers will in the future inevitably withdraw from us.

Meanwhile, it was to the party’s advantage to stall for time:

It is necessary for us to gain time by putting a brake on the splitting away of the middle bourgeois layers so that we may prepare ourselves for the struggle against the Provisional Government.

Eventually, political questions would give place to social questions, and “the middle bourgeois layers [will] split away”; at that time the Provisional Government
will become transformed from an organ for fortifying the conquests of the revolution into an organ for organizing the counter-revolution.

Stalin claimed to see the beginnings of this process already, in the form of agitation in the army against the Petrograd Soviet, coupled with support for the slogan “War to a victorious conclusion!” Thus for Stalin the question of whether or not to support the Provisional Government was not, as it was for Lenin, a simple one to be answered solely on the basis of the government’s class composition but a tactical one in which the question of timing was of paramount importance:

Insofar as the Provisional Government fortifies the steps of the revolution, to that extent we must support it; but insofar as it is counterrevolutionary, support to the Provisional Government is not permissible.

Stalin cautioned against too rash a test of strength:

Many comrades who have arrived from the provinces ask whether we shouldn’t immediately pose the question of the seizure of power. But it is untimely to pose the question now. The Provisional Government is not so weak. The strength of the Provisional Government lies in the support of Anglo-French capitalism, in the inertia of the provinces, and in the sympathy for it. . . . We must bide our time until the Provisional Government exhausts itself, until the time when in the process of fulfilling the revolutionary program it discredits itself.

When that time comes, Stalin argued,

The only organ capable of taking power is the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies on an all-Russian scale.

Here Stalin reverted to the idea advanced in his Pravda article of March 14; the possibility of an all-Russian congress of soviets had not yet occurred to him, even though the first steps toward the organization of such a congress were actively going ahead at the very moment he was speaking.

Stalin’s final recommendation was for cautious preparation for an eventual test of strength:

We . . . must bide our time until the moment when the events will reveal the hollowness of the Provisional Government; we must be prepared, when the time comes, when the events have matured, and until then we must organize the center, the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, and strengthen it. Therein lies the task of the moment.

Stalin then read the resolution on the Provisional Government adopted by the Russian Bureau on March 22, rejecting that body as
“incapable of solving the tasks posed by the revolution” and calling for
the consolidation of all forces around the Soviet of Worker’s and Soldiers’
Deputies as the embryo of revolutionary power.

Stalin made it clear, however, that he favored the more moderate
position adopted by the Krasnoyarsk Soviet, which employed the
“insofar as” formula:

To support the Provisional Government in its activities only insofar as it
follows a course of satisfying the demands of the working class and the
revolutionary peasantry in the revolution that is taking place.

In his summing up, however, Stalin swung over to a more criti-
cal attitude:

Up to now the revolutionary initiative has come from the Soviet. The
Soviet of Workers’ Deputies has issued declarations, broached issues and
made threats, while the Provisional Government has balked, struggled,
only finally to agree. In such a situation can one speak of supporting such a
Government? One can rather speak of the Government supporting us. It
is not logical to speak of the support of the Provisional Government, on
the contrary, it is more proper to speak of the Government not hindering
us from putting our program into effect.

Stalin then proposed that a resolution that did not support the
Provisional Government be accepted as a basis. In the end, however,
the conference voted unanimously in favor of a resolution presented
by the Executive Committee which explicitly supported the Provi-
sional Government.56

For the session of March 29 the protocols record a motion introduced
by Yakov M. Sverdlov, who had just completed his arduous journey
from exile back to civilization. Characteristically, Sverdlov’s motion
concerned procedure rather than substance and was designed to move
forward the business of the conference. His motion, “to close the
discussion, elect a committee, and give the floor to the reporters for
summary,” was carried.

It must have been shortly after this brief appearance that Sverdlov
was sent off on his travels again, this time to Yekaterinburg in the
Urals, to organize the local party body there. Soviet biographers of
Sverdlov state that the assignment was made by the party Central
Committee, and given the structure of Bolshevik politics in late
March 1917, Ulam is probably correct in saying that this meant Stalin
and Kamenev.57 Stalin’s part in the order, assuming that its aim was to
remove Sverdlov from the scene of action, would be compatible with other evidence pointing to an antipathy between him and Sverdlov.

If that was the underlying purpose behind Sverdlov's new assignment, he neatly circumvented it and, within less than a month, was back in Petrograd, this time as a duly accredited delegate to the party's Seventh Conference. From that point on, Sverdlov never looked back. Until his untimely death in March 1919, he remained at the nerve center of the party machine, designing and carrying out policies that helped shape the destiny of the party, the revolution, and Stalin.

During the next two days, March 30 and 31, Stalin took little recorded part in the conference's proceedings, but he made a noteworthy appearance at the April 1 session, where the principal topic was the question of unification between the Bolsheviks and left-wing Mensheviks, following a proposal by Iraklii Tseretelli, one of the Menshevik leaders in the Executive Committee of the Soviet.

Stalin expressed enthusiasm for holding exploratory talks: We ought to go [to a proposed meeting with the Mensheviks]. Unification is possible along the lines of Zimmerwald-Kienthal.58

Molotov differed sharply:

Tseretelli wants to unite heterogeneous elements. Tseretelli calls himself a Zimmerwaldist and a Kienthalist, and for this reason unification along these lines is incorrect, both politically and organizationally.

Also at odds with Stalin was Pyotr Zalutsky, like Molotov one of the original members of the pre-March 12 Russian Bureau. In his view,

It is impossible to unite [with the left-wing Mensheviks] on the basis of a superficial Zimmerwald-Kienthal token. . . . It is necessary to lead the masses behind us. It is necessary to advance a definite program.

Molotov and Zalutsky were defending a line that they shared with Lenin. But that fact did not deter Stalin. Assuming the role of mediator and conciliator he urged,

There is no use running ahead and anticipating disagreements. There is no party life without disagreements. We will live down trivial disagreements within the party. But there is one question—it is impossible to unite what cannot be united. We will have a single party with those who agree on Zimmerwald and Kienthal, i.e., those who are against revolutionary defensism. That is the line of demarcation.

To quiet fears that the party might find itself committed to a merger as the result of the proposed talks, Stalin added,
We must inform the Mensheviks that our desire is only the desire of the group meeting here and that it is not binding upon all Bolsheviks. We ought to go to the meeting, but not advance any platforms. Within the framework of what we desire is the convocation of a conference on the basis of anti-defensism.

The delegates then voted on competing resolutions, one offered by Stalin, the other by Molotov. Stalin’s called for unification with “those Mensheviks who held the standpoint of Zimmerwald and Kienthal, i.e., anti-defensism,” Molotov’s for preparation of a separate Bolshevik Platform. Both resolutions agreed that the proposed meeting with the Mensheviks should be “informative in character,” non-binding.

By a unanimous vote the delegates approved Stalin’s proposal to go to the meeting. His initiative had won him his first victory. Discussion then moved on to the question of how best to carry out the talks. V. P. Milyutin (Lenin’s first commissar of agriculture, later purged by Stalin) proposed that a bureau be elected “for contact with the centers,” that is, the Menshevik and Bolshevik leaders. Stalin offered the counterproposal that negotiations should be channeled through the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, which could get in touch with “internationalist-Mensheviks on the question.” This proposal, which was carried with only one negative vote (probably Milyutin’s), serves as a useful indication of the easy familiarity that Stalin had by now acquired with the bureaucratic machinery of the Soviet Executive Committee.

In recognition of his leading role in the discussion, the conference concluded its April 1 session by electing Stalin to a four-member committee to negotiate with the Mensheviks and charged him with responsibility for making a report on the subject at a forthcoming joint session of the two parties.

Altogether, Stalin’s achievements at the April 1 session constituted a modest but genuine triumph. He had displayed leadership in guiding the conference toward the goals he had formulated; he had made tactical concessions without sacrificing his major objectives; and he had carried the delegates with him in the voting.

In retrospect, however, Stalin’s triumph was revealed as an April Fool’s joke played on him by history. By obtaining approval of his policy, Stalin ensured that his activities during the next few days would be directed toward a goal that the party later disavowed. But it was not only in hindsight that Stalin’s policies were exposed as a violation of Leninist principles. At the time of the March conference it was already known to many party members, including Stalin, that
Lenin had demanded that the party strictly avoid any compromise with other parties. A telegram of March 6 from Lenin to a group of Bolsheviks in Stockholm just about to leave for Russia included the stern admonition, “No rapprochement whatsoever with the other parties.” The record shows that this telegram was read and discussed at the March 13 session of the Russian Bureau, with Stalin present. It was Stalin’s direct, open violation of Lenin’s categorical instruction on this point which made the protocols of the March conference a seriously damaging piece of evidence undermining his later efforts to portray himself as Lenin’s loyal follower and undeviating supporter. It was in part to reinforce that image that the memoirs of Sergei Alliluev, suitably doctored by party historians, were issued in 1946, at a time when the whole issue of Stalin’s relations with Lenin was being reexamined in connection with the publication of Stalin’s Works. Awkwardly inserted into Alliluev’s modest and straightforward text is the obviously contrived statement (referring to 1904, but clearly meant to have general validity),

In the numerous discussions and disputes Koba [Stalin] was the terror of the Mensheviks and of everyone who compromised with them. Lenin abroad, in emigration, Koba here in the Transcaucasus, carried out a common task—they laid the foundation of a new, Bolshevik Party.

Furthermore, by pursuing the will-o’-the-wisp of unification, Stalin lost sight of a forthcoming event that was fundamentally to alter Bolshevik policy on the revolution and Stalin’s position in the Bolshevik party. The long-awaited return to Russia of the party’s leader, Lenin, was now only a few days away; preparations to make his reception a suitably impressive spectacle were already going ahead, and a greeting committee was being formed. All this eager preparation was going on without any participation by Stalin. Intent on achieving his goal of unification with the left-wing Mensheviks, he failed to realize the importance of Lenin’s return for the party, for the revolution, and for himself.