The last days of Lieutenant Jakov Stalin

Colin Simpson and John Shirley, *Sunday Times* 24th Jan. 1980

Joseph Stalin, the Russian dictator, died in 1953 with one abiding regret: he had been unable to discover the fate of his eldest son, Jakov, who of all his children - including even his daughter, Svetlana - was the one he had come to care about most.

Jakov had been a lieutenant in the Russian army. All Stalin knew was that he had been captured by the Germans at the Siege of Smolensk in 1941, and held in a prisoner of war camp. Rumours that he had died there conflicted with stories that he had escaped. The Russian leader was unable to establish the truth, and though towards the end of this life, he offered a reward of a million roubles, no information was forthcoming.

The truth about Jakov's fate had in fact been known to the British for eight yers before Joe Stalin died. But they had deliberately suppressed it. 'The evidence makes unsavoury reading' notes a Foreign Office official after studying the details in 1945. 'We do not think it would give Marshall Stalin any comfort.'

The full facts are contained in German documents, withheld by the Cabinet Office until now, although a bald summary was released in 1968. The Sunday Times has been allowed access to the documents. We have also managed to trace one survivor from the prisoner of war camp where Jakov was held.

The story that emerged is a grim one. In the end, Jakov Stalin committed suicide in a particularly horrifying manner, in the bleak surroundings of Sachsenhausen Camp. The only surviving witness to the incident Thomas 'Red' Cushing, still talks of the extraordinary pressures which drove Stalin to his death. He was watching through the window of a prison hut when Jakov finally met his end.

'I remember it as if it were yesterday,' said Cushing last week. 'It was one of the saddest events of my life.'

Sachsenhausen concentration camp, near Berlin, was a notorious place, even by Nazi standards. It was especially feared by Soviet prisoners: in 1941, 1,800 Russian soldiers were shot there and in the following years many more were lethally injected or used as subjects for pseudo-medical experiments. Of 200,000 prisoners who passed through the camp, less than half survived.

Attached to the cap, however, was a separate compound which housed prisoners - some of them the relatives of Allied leaders - who the Germans believed might be useful as bargaining counters in the event of a Nazi defeat. The prisoners lived in three huts, each partitioned into eight sections.

Jakov Djugashvili Stalin arrived in this compound towards the end of 1942, a shattered man. Not only had he been taken prisoner but by surrendering at the siege of Smolensk he had directly disobeyed his father's commands - Stalin had issued orders that Russian soldiers should defend the city to the last man.

The Germans tried hard to win over the young Stalin - including a personal introduction to Field Marshal Goring - but he determinedly refused to co-operate.

At Sachsenhausen, Jakov was expected to work but was still accorded certain privileges. He was billeted in Hut A, inside the special compound, with five others. The hut was spacious. It had a communal eating area and two lavatories. There were two bedrooms. Jakov shared one with Wasili Kokorin, a nephew of the Soviet Foreign Minister, Molotov; in the other were four British prisoners-of-war, Staff Sergeant Cushing, William Murphy, Andrew Walsh and Patrick O'Brien. Cushing is the only member of the British party still alive today.

His active service in the war was brief but colourful. He was captured by the Germans wandering drunkenly behind the lines at Dunkirk and following a series of unsuccessful escape attempts he passed through a number of POW camps to the security of Sachsenhausen.

'It was a terrible place,' says Cushing, 'but we survived.'

Russian and British prisoners deteriorated quickly in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the camp. The British suspected Kokorin, a small self-centred man anxious to curry favour with the German guards, of passing information to the Gestapo. They were equally contemptuous of Jakov. Unlike Kokorin, he became increasingly aggressive in his defence of Russian communism, continually 'shouting bolshevist propaganda', according to a statement Cushing made.

There was a constant barrage of accusations between the two sides: the British felt the Russians were always seeking personal meetings with the camp commandant to obtain special favours - cigarettes, clean clothes.

For their part, the Russians goaded the British about their wealth, in particular over an expensive watch one of the Irishmen was wearing. They attacked the calibre of British troops in general, and criticised the soldiers for standing to attention when spoken to by the German officers in charge of the camp - the implication being that the British were cowards.

According to the documents we have scrutinised Stalin's son became particularly provocative. He said that when the war was over, the Red Army would drive through to Spain, English dukes, earls, barons and landowners - according to Jakov they were

'Hitler's puppets' - would all be murdered.

In early 1943, the atmosphere was poisonous. Small events sparked off violent quarrels. There were rows over the distribution of Red Cross parcels, and petty disputes about national habits. The incident that triggered off the final tragedy of Jakov Stalin was typical: it concerned the latrines.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, April 14, 1943, in a particularly heated exchange, Cushing accused Stalin's son of refusing to flush the lavatory and of deliberately fouling the wooden

seat. If true, it was an offence calculated to enrage Cushing, who, as a British POW did not have to work, and saw himself as the hut 'housekeeper' keeping the quarters clean.

The row spread quickly to the other prisoners. Murphy accused Jakov of the same behaviour. Outside the hut, O'Brien confronted Kokorin with the allegation that he defecated on the ground and fouled the latrine used by the British soldiers. O'Brien called Kokorin 'a bolshevist shit'; Kokorin called O'Brien 'an English shit.' A fight broke out and O'Brien hit Kokorin.

The precise role-played in these exchanges by Jakov Stalin, and indeed his responsibility for them, remains unclear. What does seem certain, however, is that the accumulated effect of constant bickering, rows, accusations - and finally the fight - broke the spirit of a man already suffering from confused emotions about his loyalties, his background and his future.

That evening, at curfew, Jakov refused to go back into the hut. He demanded to see the camp commandant, claiming he was being insulted by the British prisoners, and when his request was turned down, he appears to have gone berserk.

Wildly waving a piece of wood, he ran about the area of the camp, shouting in broken German, to the SS guards on duty, 'shoot me, shoot me'. Then, in what appears to have been a clear desire to kill himself, he turned and ran towards the three-stage electrified fencing-surrounding perimeter.

Cushing himself saw what happened. He had placed the blackout sheeting on the eight windows of Hut A a few minutes earlier, when he heard the commotion in the yard and peered out.

Talking to the *Sunday Times* at his home in County Cork last week, he described what followed: "I saw Jakov running about as if he were insane. He just ran straight onto the wire. There was a huge flash and all the searchlights suddenly went on. I knew that was the end of him."

The final moments of the tragedy were graphically related in a statement we have examined that is made by SS officer Konrad Hartich, who was on duty at the fence.

"He (Jakov) put one leg over the trip-wire, crossed the neutral zone and put one foot into the barbed wire entanglement. At the same time, he grabbed an insulator with his left hand. Then he left go of it and grabbed the electrified fence.

"He stood still for a moment with his right leg back and his chest pushed out and shouted to me 'Guard, you are a soldier, don't be a coward, shoot me.' "

Harfich fired a single shot. The bullet entered Stalin's head four centimetres in front of his right ear. Death was instantaneous.

"Afterwards the Germans tried to make me take him off the wire and wrap his body in a blanket," said Cushing. "It was the first time I felt sorry for the poor bastard."

The death of Jakov Stalin was a grave embarrassment to the German high command who feared that the Russians would discover what had happened and exact retribution on German prisoners. But early in July 1945 an Anglo-American team sifting through German archives in Berlin unearthed the full details of the story.

Realising the implications the British Foreign Office reacted quickly, and on July 27, 1945, Michael Vyyyan, a senior Foreign Office official, wrote to his opposite number in the American State Department.

"Our own inclination here is to recommend that the idea of communicating to Marshal Stalin should be dropped…It would naturally be distasteful to draw attention to the Anglo-Russian quarrels which preceded the death of his son."

The Americans agreed and the documents disappeared into the Foreign Office archives. In 1975, when under the 30-year-rule they were due to be released to the Public Record Office, the original documents were baldly summarised, while the originals went to the Cabinet Office.

Additional research: Angela Francis and Ian Sayer.

SOURCE: https://irelandscw.com/ibvol-CushingStalin.htm