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BY H. L. MENCKEN

## *The Asiatic Tammany*

STALIN, by Isaac Don Levine. \$3.50. 8 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ ; 421 pp. New York: *The Cosmopolitan Book Corporation*.

IN THE list of high officers of the Russian state the name of Joseph Vissarionovitch Stalin, *geb.* Djugashvili, does not appear. He is neither chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, as Lenin was, nor commissar for the Army and Navy, as Trotsky was. He is not what would be called, in democratic lands, the President of the Republic, nor is he the Prime Minister, nor is he in the Cabinet in any other capacity, nor has he any military rank, nor is he a member of what corresponds to our Congress. His only formal connection with the government is as a member of the Council of Labor and Defense, a semi-official body of such small importance that Lenin's putative successor as head of the state, Michael Kalinin, does not belong to it. Yet Stalin runs Russia as surely and as openly as if he were the Czar come back to life, and in many ways he exercises a kind of power that the Czar never dreamed of. Nothing can go on without his consent. He is the sole repository of every kind of genuine authority. No man may so much as live in the country if he says no—not even one of the founders and saints of Bolshevism. He heaved out the mighty Trotsky, and he could heave out any of the others. To find his match one must go back to the Europe of the Middle Ages—nay, to the Persia of the Sassanids.

This curious man, unquestionably the most powerful despot now alive in the

world, comes from Georgia in the Transcaucasus—which is to say, he is an Asiatic. Characteristically, he is very proud of the fact, and frequently refers to it. Until he was more than thirty years old—he is now less than fifty-two—he never saw St. Petersburg. But already he had been arrested three times, and had escaped three times, and during the few years following he was to escape four times more. In 1913, however, the Russian police took him to the remote and forlorn town of Turukhansk, on the Yensiei river in Siberia, only a few miles from the Arctic Circle, and there they kept him safely until 1917. Thus he had no part in the World War. What his attitude toward it was is now a matter of dispute among Bolshevist historians. Trotsky alleges that he covertly favored it, and even showed signs of Russian patriotism, but this seems rather improbable. Stalin himself has never deigned to mention the subject. Late in 1915 Lenin tried to get into communication with him, but he was in exile under his legal name of Djugashvili, and Lenin could not remember it! In 1917, when the Czar fell, he returned to St. Petersburg, and was presently supporting Kerensky and pleading for a compromise with the Mensheviks. Trotsky and company now make much of this fact, but again Stalin prefers to maintain a lofty silence.

How he got into the good graces of Lenin, who must have been pretty suspicious of him at the start, is told in detail by Mr. Levine, and also how, as Lenin gradually disintegrated, he seized the reins of power. The struggle was a hard one,

for Trotsky was arrayed against him, and Trotsky, in those days, was a god of only a little less rank than that of Lenin himself. But Stalin turned out to be the better politician. He knew how to win men by seeming to defer to them. One by one, he lined up the younger Bolsheviks, and worked them into higher and higher places. Long before Lenin died he was the boss of a machine that functioned perfectly and irresistibly. He wasted little energy on efforts to court the populace. He made few speeches and seldom appeared in public. When he had to show himself he took a back seat, leaving Trotsky to do the honors. But his machine grew stronger every day, for he knew that the mainspring of practical politics is the lust for jobs, and he knew how to get them for the ambitious. When Lenin died at last he was ready for a formal test of strength. In a few months Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev and the rest of the opposition leaders were either jailed or exiled, and Stalin was undisputed boss of Russia.

He continues in that rôle today, though, as I have said, he has scarcely any existence as an official person. His power lies in his position as secretary-general of the Communist party. As such he dominates the party Organizational Bureau, of which his creature, Karganovitch, is the titular chief—and the Organizational Bureau distributes the jobs. No man can hold office in Russia, whether high or low, without its consent. That is to say, no man can hold office without the consent of Stalin. He is ten times as powerful as any Mark Hanna or Boies Penrose ever was in the United States; he is even more powerful than Tweed and Croker were in New York. For Hanna and Penrose, Tweed and Croker faced an opposition that was powerful too: there was always the chance that they might lose an election, and so

sink to impotence. But in Russia there can be but one party, and Stalin is now its sole proprietor. Theoretically, he must call a party congress every year, and submit his acts to its ratification. Before his day such congresses were actually held annually, and sometimes they saw hot discussions. But since he became boss in 1925 there have been but two of them, and their proceedings have been marked by all the tranquillity of a Republican National Convention under Penrose. Today it is quite as dangerous in Russia for a good Bolshevik to flout the boss as it is for an outsider to flout Communism itself. The rebel loses his job in ten minutes, and next day he is on his way to some remote outpost in Central Asia, or to some unpleasant hoosegow nearer home.

Well, what are Stalin's ideas? Where is he headed? What does he hope to accomplish? Mr. Levine appears to believe that his appetite for mere personal glory is very slight. Like the orthodox American boss, he seldom appears in public, and does not crave high-sounding dignities and public applause. He is quite content to let such figure-heads as Kalinin, Rykov and Litvinov bask in the limelight, just as Mark Hanna was content to defer to McKinley. It is the substance of power that he wants, not the shine and noise. But what does he propose to do with it? Mr. Levine says that his aims are two-fold. First, he hopes to Americanize Russia sufficiently to lift it out of its present appalling wallow and outfit it with money and bayonets. And then he proposes to strike westward. "The great tragedy will come," says S. Dmitrievsky, late a member of the Bolshevik diplomatic corps,

when our troops, the hordes of Eurasia, enter Berlin and Paris. Then Europe will cease being Europe, and become part of Eurasia. Such is Stalin's faith in the world-

revolution. He will present it to Europe on the tip of a Russian-Asiatic bayonet. And he will surrender to no Western proletariat the hegemony of the revolution, for in the depths of his soul he hates and despises the proletariat of the West as much as he does the bourgeoisie.

Mr. Levine does not take this threat too seriously. Stalin, he hints, is far too Asiatic to be a good economist. He refuses to consider the payment of the Czarist debts, and thus bars the Soviet Union from the international money market, but all the while he needs cash to carry out the Five-Year Plan and his other grandiose enterprises, and he must pay ruinous premiums for it. During 1929 and 1930 he borrowed \$1,000,000,000 on short-term notes, "discounted at rates ranging from 25 to 30%". To meet them when they fell due he had to sell Russian products in large amounts and at any price he could get, and very often that price was below the cost of production. And to make up the deficit he had to keep on inflating the national currency, thus enormously diminishing the purchasing power of the Russian masses. It may be that this scheme, in the long run, will somehow accumulate capital, and make Russia rich. We live in an age of miracles. But it seems much more likely that its end will be complete bankruptcy.

Stalin as a success would plainly be a menace to Europe, which is making heavy weather of recovering from the World War and is thus in no condition to resist a really formidable Russian advance. But Stalin as a failure may be very dangerous too, for the desperate fanaticism of Asia is in his bones, and his past history shows that he is quite devoid of squeamishness. Even his fellow Bolsheviks fear his black humors, and step warily when they are upon him. Back in 1907, in Tiflis, some of

his disciples shocked even the Bolsheviks by staging a bombing and robbery which cost fifty lives. "Around the central Pushkin Park scores of bodies were swimming in pools of blood. Many were writhing in pain". The Asiatics know how to run amuck. If this one ever does so, there will be a circus in the grand manner.

### *The Growth of English*

A GRAMMAR OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, by Hans Kurath & George O. Curme. Vol. III, Syntax, by Dr. Curme. \$5. 8½ x 5½; 616 pp. Boston: D. C. Heath & Company.

OF THIS work only the third volume, dealing with syntax, has appeared so far. The first, by Dr. Kurath, will be devoted to the history of the language, with special attention to word-formation, spelling and phonetics. The second, by Dr. Curme, will be given over to accident. Dr. Curme, in his discussion of syntax, might have very well borrowed the explicatory phrase in the title of the late Dr. Otto Jespersen's great English grammar: "on historical principles." For in dealing with this or that locution he constantly goes back to its origins in what he calls "older English". Again like Dr. Jespersen he carries his examples down to the day before yesterday, and finds them in newspapers, popular novels and public documents as well as in formal literature. Yet again he presents his discoveries in an objective and unpedagogical manner, and though his bias is admittedly in favor of that sort of English "which is the most expressive, the most simple", he by no means tries to police the language. "Good English," he says, "varies according to the occasion. Evening dress would be out of place in playing a football game. Loose colloquial English, as often described in this book, is frequently appropriate."