The Origins of the Cold War

Joseph Stalin, 1879–1953
Born in a part of the Russian empire called Georgia in 1879, Joseph Dzhugashvili was the son of a shoemaker. Dzhugashvili attended a seminary, but was expelled in 1899 for activities against the Czar’s government. In 1903 he joined Lenin’s Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party and began to serve in a variety of party posts. By 1917, when the Russian Revolution swept the Bolsheviks into power, Dzhugashvili was using a new last name—Stalin—the Russian word for steel.

When Lenin died in 1924, Stalin seized power. Impatient to make the Soviet Union a world military and economic power, Stalin put the Five Year Plans in place. The result was a large and powerful army, but the cost was widespread famine throughout the country.

During the 1930s, Stalin ruthlessly ordered the murder or expulsion of anyone he perceived as a threat. When World War II began, Stalin signed a nonaggression pact with Hitler. He then took the opportunity to annex large parts of Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union. When Germany invaded Russia in 1941, Stalin formed an alliance with the United States and Britain. At the end of the war, Stalin continued to use terror and repression to build the Soviet Union into an industrial and military power.

1. What caused Stalin to form an alliance with the United States and Britain?

2. Why did Stalin launch the Five Year Plans?