

Chapter 28 Primary Source Activity

The contemporary poet and novelist Yevgeny Yevtushenko grew up in Siberia during the 1930s, at the height of Stalin's power (textbook pages 729–730). His family, formerly from Ukraine, was patriotic and believed in the ideals of the Revolution, despite the brutality of Stalin's regime. In this excerpt, Yevtushenko recalls his feelings when he was five. ♦ *As you read, think about what life is like in a dictatorship. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Growing Up in Stalin's Russia

I never saw my grandfather again. My mother told me he had gone away for a long trip. I didn't know that on that very night he had been arrested on a charge of high treason. I didn't know that my mother stood night after night in that street with the beautiful name, Marine Silence Street, among thousands of other women who were also trying to find out whether their fathers, husbands, brothers, sons were still alive. I was to learn all this later. . . .

But at this time I knew nothing.

I went with my father and mother to watch the holiday parades, organized worker's demonstrations, and I would beg my father to lift me up a little higher.

I wanted to catch sight of Stalin.

And as I waved my small red flag, riding high in my father's arms above that sea of heads, I had the feeling that Stalin was looking right at me.

I was filled with a terrible envy of those children my age lucky enough to be chosen to hand bouquets of flowers to Stalin and whom he gently patted on the head, smiling his famous smile into his famous mustache.

To explain away the cult of Stalin's personality by saying simply that it was imposed by force is, to say the least, rather naive. There is no doubt that Stalin exercised a sort of hypnotic charm.

Many genuine Bolsheviks who were arrested at that time utterly refused to believe that this had happened with his knowledge, still less on his personal instructions. Some of them, after being tortured, traced the words "Long live Stalin" in their own blood on the walls of their prison.

Did the Russian people understand what was really happening? I think the broad masses did not. They sensed intuitively that something was wrong, but no one wanted to believe what he guessed at in his heart. It would have been too terrible.

The Russian people preferred to work rather than to think and to analyze. . . . They worked in a furious

desperation, drowning with the thunder of machines, tractors, and bulldozers the cries that might have reached them across the barbed wire of Siberian concentration camps.

“ . . . no one wanted to believe what he guessed at in his heart. It would have been too terrible.”

Source: "A Precocious Autobiography," trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew, in *Yevtushenko's Reader* (E. P. Dutton, 1972).

Questions to Think About

- As a small boy, how did the author regard Stalin?
- What evidence of Stalin's brutality does Yevtushenko mention in this excerpt?
- Identifying Central Issues** According to Yevtushenko, what did ordinary Russian people think about Stalin's rule? How did they avoid acknowledging reality?
- Activity** Stalin's government, like other totalitarian regimes, tried to recruit young people. Research and report on some of the programs aimed at young people in the Soviet Union in this period, such as the Young Pioneers. How were they organized? What did their members do?