

## **May 19, 1944**

### **Djilas's First Conversation with Stalin**

#### **Citation:**

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#### **Summary:**

Milovan Djilas recounts his first meeting and impressions of Stalin and discuss wartime matters.

#### **Original Language:**

English

#### **Contents:**

Transcript - English

In the Soviet Union one achieved the state of blessedness gradually, from the bottom up. That was how Terzic and I got to see Stalin. It all happened in such a way that we didn't know that we would be received, let alone when. I had just completed a lecture at the Panslavic Committee and had begun to answer questions, when someone whispered to me that I had an important and urgent engagement. It was five o'clock in the afternoon. There was only slight confusion, as if everyone were accustomed to such emergencies.

A state security colonel informed us-after the car was on its way, of course-that Stalin would receive us. I thought of our paltry gifts: the infallible state security had already brought them along in the car from the villa we had been moved to in the outskirts. Suddenly I felt insignificant and chilled: Stalin was the incarnation of an idea-of a now suffering but imminently happy mankind. I realized, as never before, how much my meeting with Stalin was a part of chance, yet I also felt thrilled that all this was happening to me, and that I would be able to tell my friends about it. All misunderstandings and disagreements-everything unpleasant, insofar as we were capable of recognizing it-vanished before the stirring, inconceivable grandeur of what was about to take place, and what was already going on inside me.

Without complicated procedures or long waits, they led us into study which Stalin entered from his room at the same time that we entered from the secretary's room. Standing there were Molotov and Zhukov, a general in the state security assigned to foreign missions. As I shook hands with Stalin, I spoke my last name. He didn't reply. But Terzic clicked his heels, and along with his name and surname reeled off his entire title, to which Stalin replied, "Stalin." It all seemed a bit funny. Why would Stalin have to introduce himself?

Stalin was in a marshal's uniform. But there was nothing military about him, not even any of that majesty one saw in pictures and films. He was of small stature and disproportioned, his trunk too short, his arms too long. His face was pale and rough, ruddy around the cheekbones, his teeth black and irregular, his mustache and hair thin. An admirable head, though, like that of a mountain man, with lively and impish avid yellow eyes. His forehead was not as stark as in his pictures. One felt the intent, constant activity of the mind.

Stalin surprised me. Pleasantly and sadly. He had to be presented as strong and sturdy, yet he had grown feeble and worn in serving all us Communists, in advancing the cause. That exhaustion immediately vanished in conversation. Stalin constantly fidgeted and fussed with his pipe and his blue pencil, as he passed easily from one subject to the next. A bundle of nerves which never missed the slightest word or glance.

And he had a sense of humor-crude, sudden humor. This surprised me least of all, perhaps because I had heard certain anecdotes about Stalin and run across similar remarks in his writings. In fact, I heard a story that circulated among the top echelons in Moscow about Stalin's remark, when he heard that Konstantin Simonov's collection of love poems had been printed in an enormous edition: "Two copies would have been enough: one for her, the other for him."

When we sat down, I remarked that we were enthusiastic about everything we had seen in the Soviet Union. "And we are not enthusiastic," he replied, "though we are doing all we can to make things better in Russia." Several times thereafter he referred to Russia instead of the Soviet Union. I assumed that this was a current wartime emphasis on the role of the Russian people. Maybe that is how he actually felt. Today I would add: he had already learned, and learned well, that what he had acquired was more important than in what name he had acquired it.

Turning to Molotov, Stalin brought up recognition of the National Committee:

"Couldn't we somehow trick the English into recognizing Tito, who alone is fighting the Germans?"

Molotov smiled smugly. "No, that is impossible; they are perfectly aware of developments in Yugoslavia."

However, when it came to material aid, Stalin's generosity went beyond what we asked. He approved the creation of a Soviet air base to supply our army. "Let us try," he said. "We shall see what attitude the West takes and how far they are prepared to go to help Tito," And he was very upset when I mentioned payment: "You insult me. You are shedding your blood, and you expect me to charge you for the weapons! I am not a merchant, we are not merchants. You are fighting for the same cause as we. We are duty bound to share with you whatever we have."

He examined our poor gifts cursorily. I think I detected a hidden sadness in his expression-at our poverty, or else because the gifts reminded him of his native province.

The unreality of that one hour seemed to linger as he led us into a dusk of northern lights. Reality appeared less important but more beautiful, and the world seemed crisper and better. Before us, Moscow lay darkened by war, yet all in expectation of higher rations and new victory salutes of fireworks-serene, uncomplaining.