

# PROLOGUE

---

## THE BANK-ROBBERY

At 10.30 a.m. on the sultry morning of Wednesday, 13 June 1907, in the seething central square of Tiflis, a dashing moustachioed cavalry captain in boots and jodhpurs, wielding a big Circassian sabre, performed tricks on horseback, joking with two pretty, well-dressed Georgian girls who twirled gaudy parasols – while fingering Mauser pistols hidden in their dresses.

Raffish young men in bright peasant blouses and wide sailor-style trousers waited on the street corners, cradling secreted revolvers and grenades. At the louche Tilipuchuri Tavern on the square, a crew of heavily armed gangsters took over the cellar bar, gaily inviting passers-by to join them for drinks. All of them were waiting to carry out the first exploit by Josef Djugashvili, aged twenty-nine, later known as Stalin, to win the attention of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Few outside the gang knew of the plan that day for a criminal-terrorist ‘spectacular’, but Stalin had worked on it for months. One man who did know the broad plan was Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party,\* hiding in a villa in Kuokola, Finland, far to the north. Days earlier, in Berlin, and then in London, Lenin had secretly met with Stalin to order the big heist, even though their Social-Democratic Party had just strictly banned all ‘expropriations’, the euphemism for bank-robberies. But Stalin’s operations, heists and killings, always conducted with meticulous attention to detail and secrecy, had made him the ‘main financier of the Bolshevik Centre’.<sup>2</sup>

The events that day would make headlines all over the globe, literally shake Tiflis to its foundations, and further shatter the fragmented Social-Democrats into warring factions: that day would both make Stalin’s career and almost ruin it – a watershed in his life.

In Yerevan Square, the twenty brigands who formed the core of Stalin’s

\*In 1903, the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party split into two factions, the Bolsheviks under Lenin and the Mensheviks under Martov, who fought one another but remained part of the same party until 1912 when they formally divided, never to reunite. Lenin organized and led a secret three-man cabal called the Bolshevik Centre to raise money using bank-robbery and organized crime rackets.

gang known as 'the Outfit', took up positions as their lookouts peered down Golovinsky Prospect, Tiflis's elegant main street, past the white Italianate splendour of the Viceroy's Palace. They awaited the clatter of a stagecoach and its squadron of galloping Cossacks. The army captain with the Circassian sabre caracoled on his horse before dismounting to stroll the fashionable boulevard.

Every street corner was guarded by a Cossack or policeman: the authorities were ready. Something had been expected since January. The informers and agents of the Tsar's secret police, the Okhrana, and his uniformed political police, the Gendarmes, delivered copious reports about the clandestine shenanigans of the gangs of revolutionaries and criminals. In the misty twilight of this underground, the worlds of bandit and terrorist had merged and it was hard to tell tricks from truth. But there had been 'chatter' about a 'spectacular' – as today's intelligence experts would put it – for months.

On that dazzling steamy morning, the oriental colour of Tiflis (now Tbilisi, the capital of the Republic of Georgia) hardly seemed to belong to the same world as the Tsar's capital, St Petersburg, a thousand miles away. The older streets, without running water or electricity, wound up the slopes of Mtatsminda, Holy Mountain, until they were impossibly steep, full of crookedly picturesque houses weighed down with balconies, entwined with old vines. Tiflis was a big village where everyone knew everyone else.

Just behind the Military Headquarters, on genteel Freilinskaya Street, a stone's throw from the square, lived Stalin's wife, a pretty young Georgian dressmaker named Kato Svanidze, and their newborn son Yakov. Theirs was a true love match: despite his black moods, Stalin was devoted to Kato who admired and shared his revolutionary fervour. As she sunned herself and the baby on her balcony, her husband was about to give her, and Tiflis itself, an unholy shock.

This intimate city was the capital of the Caucasus, the Tsar's wild, mountainous viceroyalty between the Black and the Caspian Seas, a cauldron of fierce and proud peoples. Golovinsky Prospect seemed Parisian in its elegance. White neo-classical theatres, a Moorish-style opera house, grand hotels and the palaces of Georgian princes and Armenian oil barons lined the street, but, as one passed the Military Headquarters, Yerevan Square opened up into an Asiatic potpourri.

Exotically dressed hawkers and stalls offered spicy Georgian *lobio* beans and hot *khachapuri* cheesecake. Water-carriers, street-traders, pickpockets and porters delivered to or stole from the Armenian and Persian Bazaars, the alleyways of which more resembled a Levantine souk than a European city. Caravans of camels and donkeys, loaded with silks and spices from Persia and Turkestan, fruit and wineskins from the lush Georgian countryside, ambled through the gates of the Caravanserai. Its young waiters and errand-boys served its clientele of guests and diners, carrying in the bags, unharnessing the camels – and watching the square. Now we know from the newly

opened Georgian archives that Stalin, Fagin-like, used the Caravanserai boys as a prepubescent revolutionary street-intelligence and courier service. Meanwhile in one of the Caravanserai's cavernous backrooms, the chief gangsters gave their gunmen a peptalk, rehearsing the plan one last time. Stalin himself was there that morning.

The two pretty teenage girls with twirling umbrellas and loaded revolvers, Patsia Goldava and Anneta Sulakvelidze, 'brown-haired, svelte, with black eyes that expressed youth', casually sashayed across the square to stand outside the Military Headquarters, where they flirted with Russian officers, Gendarmes in smart blue uniforms, and bowlegged Cossacks.

Tiflis was – and still is – a languid town of strollers and boulevardiers who frequently stop to drink wine at the many open-air taverns: if the showy, excitable Georgians resemble any other European people, it is the Italians. Georgians and other Caucasian men, in traditional *chokha* – their skirted long coats lined down the chest with bullet pouches – swaggered down the streets, singing loudly. Georgian women in black headscarves, and the wives of Russian officers in European fashions, promenaded through the gates of the Pushkin Gardens, buying ices and sherbet alongside Persians and Armenians, Chechens, Abkhaz and Mountain Jews, in a fancy-dress jamboree of hats and costumes.

Gangs of street urchins – *kintos* – furtively scanned the crowds for scams. Teenage trainee priests, in long white surplices, were escorted by their berobed bearded priest-teachers from the pillared white Seminary across the street, where Stalin had almost qualified as a priest nine years earlier. This unSlavic, unRussian and ferociously Caucasian kaleidoscope of east and west was the world that nurtured Stalin.

Checking the time, the girls Anneta and Patsia parted, taking up new positions on either side of the square. On Palace Street, the dubious clientele of the notorious Tilipuchuri Tavern – princes, pimps, informers and pick-pockets – were already drinking Georgian wine and Armenian brandy, not far from the plutocratic grandeur of Prince Sumbatov's palace.

Just then David Sagirashvili, another revolutionary who knew Stalin and some of the gangsters, visited a friend who owned a shop above the tavern and was invited in by the cheerful brigand at the doorway, Bachua Kupriashvili, who 'immediately offered me a chair and a glass of red wine, according to the Georgian custom'. David drank the wine and was about to leave when the gunman suggested 'with exquisite politeness' that he stay inside and 'sample more snacks and wine'. David realized that 'they were letting people *into* the restaurant but would not let them *out*. Armed individuals stood at the door.'

Spotting the convoy galloping down the boulevard, Patsia Goldava, the slim brunette on lookout, sped round the corner to the Pushkin Gardens where she waved her newspaper to Stepko Intskirveli, waiting by the gate.

'We're off!' he muttered.

Stepko nodded at Anneta Sulakvelidze who was across the street just outside the Tilipuchuri, where she made a sign summoning the others from the bar. The gunmen in the doorway beckoned them. 'At a given signal,' Sagirashvili saw the brigands in the tavern put down their drinks, cock their pistols and head out, spreading across the square – thin, consumptive young men in wide trousers who had barely eaten for weeks. Some were gangsters, some desperadoes and some, typically for Georgia, were poverty-stricken princes from roofless, wall-less castles in the provinces. If their deeds were criminal, they cared nothing for money: they were devoted to Lenin, the Party and their puppet-master in Tiflis, Stalin.

'The functions of each of us had been planned in advance,' remembered a third girl in the gang, Alexandra Darakhvelidze, just nineteen, a friend of Anneta and already veteran of a spree of heists and shootouts.

The gangsters each covered the square's policemen – the *gorodovoi*, known in the streets as *pharaohs*. Two gunmen marked the Cossacks outside the City Hall; the rest made their way to the corner of Velyaminov Street and the Armenian Bazaar not far from the State Bank itself. Alexandra Darakhvelidze, in her unpublished memoirs, recalled guarding one of the street corners with two gunmen.

Now Bachua Kupriashvili, nonchalantly pretending to read a newspaper, spotted in the distance the cloud of dust thrown up by the horses' hooves. They were coming! Bachua rolled up his newspaper, poised ...

The cavalry captain with the flashing sabre, who had been promenading the square, now warned passers-by to stay out of it, but when no one paid any attention he jumped back on to his fine horse. He was no officer but the ideal of the Georgian *beau sabreur* and outlaw, half-knight, half-bandit. This was Kamo, aged twenty-five, boss of the Outfit and, as Stalin put it, 'a master of disguise' who could pass for a rich prince or a peasant laundrywoman. He moved stiffly, his half-blind left eye squinting and rolling: one of his own bombs had exploded in his face just weeks before. He was still recuperating.

Kamo 'was completely enthralled' by Stalin, who had converted him to Marxism. They had grown up together in the violent town of Gori 45 miles away. He was a bank-robber of ingenious audacity, a Houdini of prison-escapes, a credulous simpleton – and a half-insane practitioner of psychopathic violence. Intensely, eerily tranquil with a weird 'lustreless face' and a blank gaze, he was keen to serve his master, often begging Stalin: 'Let me kill him for you!' No deed of macabre horror or courageous flamboyance was beyond him: he later plunged his hand into a man's chest and cut out his heart.

Throughout his life, Stalin's detached magnetism would attract, and win the devotion of, amoral, unbounded psychopaths. His boyhood henchman Kamo and these gangsters were the first in a long line. 'Those young men followed Stalin selflessly ... Their admiration for him allowed him to impose on them his iron discipline.'<sup>3</sup> Kamo often visited Stalin's home where he had earlier borrowed Kato's father's sabre, explaining that he was 'going to play an

officer of the Cossacks'.<sup>4</sup> Even Lenin, that fastidious lawyer, raised as a nobleman, was fascinated by the daredevil Kamo whom he called his 'Caucasian bandit'. 'Kamo', mused Stalin in old age, 'was a truly amazing person.'<sup>5</sup>

'Captain' Kamo turned his horse towards the boulevard and trotted audaciously right past the advancing convoy, coming the other way. Once the shooting started, he boasted, the whole thing 'would be over in three minutes'.

The Cossacks galloped into Yerevan Square, two in front, two behind and another alongside the two carriages. Through the dust, the gangsters could make out that the stagecoach contained two men in frockcoats – the State Bank's cashier Kurdyumov and accountant Golovnya – and two soldiers with rifles cocked, while a second phaeton was packed with police and soldiers. In the thunder of hooves, it took just seconds for the carriages and horsemen to cross the square ready to turn into Sololaki Street where stood the new State Bank: the statues of lions and gods over its door represented the surging prosperity of Russian capitalism.\*

Bachua lowered his newspaper, giving the sign, then tossed it aside, reaching for his weapons. The gangsters drew out what they nicknamed their 'apples' – powerful grenades which had been smuggled into Tiflis by the girls Annetta and Alexandra, hidden inside a big sofa.

The gunmen and the girls stepped forward, pulled the fuses and tossed four grenades which exploded under the carriages with a deafening noise and an infernal force that disembowelled horses and tore men to pieces, spattering the cobbles with innards and blood. The brigands drew their Mauser and Browning pistols and opened fire on the Cossacks and police around the square who, caught totally unawares, fell wounded or ran for cover. More than ten bombs exploded. Witnesses thought they rained from every direction, even the rooftops: it was later said that Stalin had thrown the first bomb from the roof of Prince Sumbatov's mansion.

The Bank's carriages stopped. Screaming passers-by scrambled for cover. Some thought it was an earthquake: was Holy Mountain falling on to the city? 'No one could tell if the terrible shooting was the boom of cannons or explosion of bombs,' reported the Georgian newspaper *Isari* (*Arrow*). 'The sound caused panic everywhere ... almost across the whole city, people started running. Carriages and carts were galloping away ...' Chimneys had toppled from buildings; every pane of glass was shattered as far as the Viceroy's Palace.

\*The distances in this urban village are tiny. The Seminary, Stalin's family home, the Viceroy's Palace and the Bank are all about two minutes' walk from the site of the bank-robbery. Most of the buildings in Yerevan (later Beria, then Lenin, now Freedom) Square that feature here remain standing: the Tilipuchuri Tavern (now empty of any princes or brigands), the Seminary (now a museum), the City Hall, the HQ of the Caucasus Command, the State Bank and the Viceroy's Palace (where Stalin's mother lived for so long) are all unchanged. The Caravanserai, Pushkin Gardens, Adelhkanov Shoe Warehouse (where Stalin had worked) and the bazaars are gone.

Kato Svanidze was standing on her nearby balcony tending Stalin's baby with her family, 'when all of a sudden we heard the sound of bombs', recalled her sister, Sashiko. 'Terrified, we rushed into the house.' Outside, amid the yellow smoke and the wild chaos, among the bodies of horses and mutilated limbs of men, something had gone wrong.

One horse attached to the front carriage twitched then jerked back to life. Just as the gangsters ran to seize the money-bags in the back of the carriage, the horse reared up out of the mayhem and bolted down the hill towards the Soldiers Bazaar, disappearing with the money that Stalin had promised Lenin for the Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \*

During the ensuing century, Stalin's role that day was suspected yet unprovable. But now the archives in Moscow and Tbilisi show how he masterminded the operation and groomed his 'inside-men' within the Bank over many months. The unpublished memoirs of his sister-in-law Sashiko Svanidze, in the Georgian archives, record Stalin openly acknowledging that he presided over the operation.\* A century after the heist, it is now possible to reveal the truth.

Stalin revelled in the 'dirty business of politics', the conspiratorial drama of revolution. When he was dictator of Soviet Russia, he referred enigmatically, even nostalgically, to those games of 'Cossacks and bandits' – *kazaki i razboyniki*, the Russian version of 'cops and robbers' – but never gave details that might undermine his credentials as a statesman.<sup>7</sup>

The Stalin of 1907 was a small, wiry, mysterious man of many aliases, usually dressed in a red satin shirt, grey coat and his trademark black fedora. Sometimes he favoured a traditional Georgian *chokha*, and he liked to sport a white Caucasian hood, draped dashingly over his shoulder. Always on the move, often on the run, he used the many uniforms of Tsarist society as his disguises, and frequently escaped manhunts by dressing in drag.

Attractive to women, often singing Georgian melodies and declaiming poetry, he was charismatic and humorous, yet profoundly morose, an odd Georgian with a northern coldness. His 'burning' eyes were honey-flecked when friendly, yellow when angry. He had not yet settled on the moustache and hair *en brosse* of his prime: he sometimes grew a full beard and long hair, still with the auburn tinge of his youth, now darkening. Freckled and pock-marked, he walked fast but crookedly, and held his left arm stiffly, after a spate of childhood accidents and illnesses.

Indefatigable in action, he bubbled with ideas and ingenuity. Inspired by a

\*Stalin would not have thanked the Svanidzes for their frankness. They were close family for thirty years. His sister-in-law Sashiko, who left this memoir in 1934, died of cancer in 1936 – or she might have shared the fate of her sister Mariko, her brother Alyosha and his wife. Sashiko Svanidze's memoirs are used here for the first time. Some of the bank-robbers, such as Kamo, Bachua Kupriashvili and Alexandra Darakhvelidze, left unpublished, if incomplete, memoirs, also used here for the first time.

hunger for learning and an instinct to teach, he feverishly studied novels and history, but his love of letters was always overwhelmed by his drive to command and dominate, to vanquish enemies and avenge slights. Patient, calm and modest, he could also be vainglorious, pushy and thin-skinned, with outbursts of viciousness just a short fuse away.

Immersed in the honour and loyalty culture of Georgia, he was the gritty realist, the sarcastic cynic and the pitiless cutthroat *par excellence*: it was he who had created the Bolshevik bank-robbery and assassination Outfit, which he controlled from afar like a Mafia don. He cultivated the coarseness of a peasant, a trait which alienated comrades but usefully concealed his subtle gifts from snobbish rivals.

Happily married to Kato, he had chosen a heartless wandering existence that, he believed, liberated him from normal morality or responsibility, free from love itself. Yet while he wrote about the megalomania of others, he had no self-knowledge about his own drive for power. He relished his own secrecy. When he knocked on the doors of friends and they asked who was there, he would answer with mock-portentousness: 'The Man in Grey.'

One of the first professional revolutionaries, the underground was his natural habitat, through which he moved with elusively feline grace – and menace. A born extremist and conspirator, the Man in Grey was a true believer, 'a Marxist fanatic from his youth'. The violent rites of Stalin's secret planet of Caucasian conspiracy would later flower into the idiosyncratic ruling culture of the Soviet Union itself.<sup>8</sup>

'Stalin had opened the era of the hold-up,' wrote one of his fellow bank-robbery masterminds, his hometown friend Josef Davrichewy.<sup>9</sup> Stalin, we used to believe, organized operations but never took part personally. This may have been true that day in 1907, but we know now that Stalin himself, usually armed with his Mauser, was more directly involved in other robberies.<sup>10</sup>

He always kept his eyes skinned for the spectacular prize and knew that the best bank-robberies are usually inside jobs. On this occasion, he had two 'inside-men'. First, he patiently groomed a useful bank clerk. Then he bumped into a schoolfriend who happened to work for the banking mail office. Stalin cultivated him for months until he proffered the tip that a huge sum of money – perhaps as much as a million roubles – would arrive in Tiflis on 13 June 1907.

This key 'inside man' afterwards revealed that he had helped set up this colossal heist only because he was such an admirer of Stalin's romantic poetry. Only in Georgia could Stalin the poet enable Stalin the gangster.<sup>11</sup>

\* \* \*

The runaway horse with the carriage and its booty bolted across the square. Some of the gangsters panicked, but three gunmen moved with astonishing speed. Bachua Kupriashvili kept his head and sprinted towards the horse. He was too close for his own safety, but he tossed another 'apple' under its belly,

tearing out its intestines and blowing off its legs. Thrown into the air, Bachua fell stunned to the cobbles.

The carriage careened to a halt. Bachua was out of action but Datiko Chibriashvili jumped on to the coach and pulled out the sacks of money. Gripping the money-bags, he staggered through the smoke towards Velyaminov Street. But the gang was in disarray. Datiko could not run far holding the weight of the banknotes: he must hand them over – but to whom?

The drifting smoke parted to reveal carnage worthy of a small battlefield. Screams and shots still rent the air as blood spread across cobbles strewn with bodyparts. Cossacks and soldiers started to peep out, reaching for their weapons. Reinforcements were on their way from across the city. ‘All the comrades’, wrote Bachua Kupriashvili, ‘were up to the mark – except three who had weak nerves and ran off.’ Yet Datiko found himself momentarily almost alone. He hesitated, lost. The success of the plan hung by a thread.

\* \* \*

Did Stalin really throw the first bomb from the roof of Prince Sumbatov’s house? Another source, P. A. Pavlenko, one of the dictator’s pet writers, claimed that Stalin had attacked the carriage himself and been wounded by a bomb fragment. But this seems unlikely.<sup>12</sup> Stalin usually ‘held himself apart’ from everyone else in all matters for security reasons and because he always regarded himself as special.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1920s, according to Georgian sources, Kamo would drunkenly claim that Stalin had taken no active part but had watched the robbery, a report confirmed by another, questionable source connected to the police, who wrote that Stalin ‘observed the ruthless bloodshed, smoking a cigarette, from the courtyard of a mansion’ on Golovinsky Prospect. Perhaps the ‘mansion’ was indeed Prince Sumbatov’s.<sup>14</sup> The boulevard’s milkbars, taverns, cobblers, hairdressers and haberdashers crawled with Okhrana informers. Most likely, Stalin, the clandestine master who specialized in sudden appearances and vanishings, was out of the way before the shooting started. Indeed the most informed source puts him in the railway station that mid-morning.<sup>15</sup>

Here he could keep in easy contact with his network of porters and urchins on Yerevan Square. If these artful dodgers brought bad news, he would jump on a train and disappear.

\* \* \*

Just as the robbery was about to collapse, ‘Captain’ Kamo rode hell-for-leather into the square driving his own phaeton, reins in one hand and firing his Mauser with the other, like a cowboy in a Western movie. Furious that the plan had failed, cursing at the top of his voice ‘like a real captain’, he whirled his carriage round and round, effectively retaking possession of the square. Then he galloped up to Datiko, leaned down and, aided by one of the gun girls, heaved the sacks of swag into the phaeton. He turned the carriage pre-



cipitously and galloped back up the boulevard right past the Viceroy's Palace, which was buzzing like a beehive as troops massed, Cossacks saddled up and orders for reinforcements were despatched.

Kamo noticed a police phaeton cantering along in the opposite direction bearing A. G. Balabansky, the Deputy Police Chief. 'The money's safe. Run to the square,' shouted Kamo. Balabansky headed for the square. Only the next day did Balabansky realize his mistake. He committed suicide.

Kamo rode straight to Vtoraya Goncharnaya Street and into the yard of a joiner's shop behind a house owned by an old lady named Barbara 'Babe' Bochoridze. Here, with Babe's son Mikha, Stalin had spent many nights over the years. Here the robbery had been planned. It was an address well known to the local police, but the gangsters had suborned at least one Gendarme officer, Captain Zubov, who was later indicted for taking bribes – and even helping to hide the spoils. Kamo, exhausted, delivered the money, changed out of his uniform and poured a bucket of water over his sweltering head.

\* \* \*

The shockwaves of Stalin's spectacular reverberated around the world. In London the *Daily Mirror* announced 'RAIN OF BOMBS: Revolutionaries Hurl Destruction among Large Crowds of People': 'About ten bombs were hurled today, one after another, in the square in the centre of town, thronged with people. The bombs exploded with terrific force, many being killed ...' *The Times* just called it 'TIFLIS BOMB OUTRAGE'; *Le Temps* in Paris was more laconic: 'CATASTROPHE!'

Tiflis was in uproar. The usually genial Viceroy of the Caucasus, Count Vorontsov-Dashkov, ranted about the 'insolence of the terrorists'. The 'administration and army are mobilized', announced *Isari*. 'Police and patrols launched searches across the city. Many have been arrested ...' St Petersburg was outraged. The security forces were ordered to find the money and the robbers. A special detective and his team were despatched to head the investigation. Roads were closed; Yerevan Square surrounded, while Cossacks and Gendarmes rounded up the usual suspects. Every informer, every double-agent was tapped for information and duly delivered a farrago of versions, none of them actually fingering the real culprits.

Twenty thousand roubles had been left in the carriage. A surviving carriage driver, who thought he had got lucky, pocketed another 9,500 roubles but was arrested with it later: he knew nothing about the Stalin and Kamo gang. A jabbering woman gave herself up as one of the bank-robbers but turned out to be insane.

No one could guess how many robbers there had been: witnesses thought there were up to fifty gangsters raining bombs from the roofs, if not from Holy Mountain. No one actually saw Kamo take the swag. The Okhrana heard stories from all over Russia that the robbery was, variously, arranged by the state itself, by Polish socialists, by Anarchists from Rostov, by Armenian Dashnaks, or by the Socialist-Revolutionaries.

None of the gangsters was caught. Even Kupriashvili regained consciousness just in time to hobble away. In the chaotic aftermath, they scarpred in every direction, melting into the crowds. One, Eliso Lominadze, who had been covering a street-corner with Alexandra, slipped into a teachers' conference, stole a teacher's uniform and then nonchalantly wandered back to the square to admire his handiwork. 'Everyone survived it,' said Alexandra Darakhvelidze, dictating her memoirs in 1959, by then the only member of the ill-fated gang still alive.

Fifty lay wounded in the square. The bodies of three Cossacks, the bank officials and some innocent passers-by lay in pieces. The censored newspapers kept casualties low but the Okhrana's archives reveal that around forty were killed. Dressing-stations for the wounded were set up in nearby shops. Twenty-four seriously wounded were taken to hospital. An hour later, passers-by saw the funereal progress of a ghoulisn carriage carrying the dead and their body-parts down Golovinsky, like the giblets from an abattoir.<sup>16</sup>

\* \* \*

The State Bank itself was unsure if it had lost 250,000 roubles or 341,000, or somewhere between the two figures – but it was certainly an impressive sum worth about £1.7 million (US\$3.4 million) in today's money though its effective buying power was much higher.

Bochoridze and his wife Maro, another of the female bank-robbers, sewed the money into a mattress. Svelte Mauser-toting Patsia Goldava then called porters, perhaps some of Stalin's urchins, and supervised its removal to another safe house across the River Kura. The mattress was then placed on the couch of the Director of the Tiflis Meteorological Observatory where Stalin had lived and worked after leaving the Seminary. It was Stalin's last job before he plunged into the conspiratorial underground, indeed his last real employment before he joined Lenin's Soviet Government in October 1917. Later the Director of this weather-centre admitted he had never known what riches lay under his head.

Stalin himself, many sources claim, helped stow the cash in the Observatory. If this sounds like a myth, it is plausible: it transpires that he often handled stolen funds, riding shotgun across the mountains with saddlebags full of cash from bank-robberies and piracy.

Surprisingly, that night Stalin felt safe enough to go home to Kato and boast of his exploit to his family – his boys had done it.<sup>17</sup> Well might he boast. The money was safe in the weatherman's mattress and would soon be on its way to Lenin. No one suspected Stalin or even Kamo. The swag would be smuggled abroad, some of it even laundered through the Credit Lyonnais. The police of a dozen nations would pursue cash and gangsters for months, in vain.

For a couple of days after the heist, Stalin, it is said, unsuspected of any connection to the robbery, was secure enough to drink insouciantly in riverside taverns, but not for long. He suddenly told his wife that they were leaving

at once to start a new life in Baku, the oil-boom city on the other side of the Caucasus.

‘The devil knows’, reflected *Novoye Vremya* (the Tiflis *New Times*), ‘how this uniquely audacious robbery was carried out.’ Stalin had pulled off the perfect crime.

\* \* \*

The Tiflis heist turned out to be far from perfect. Indeed it became a poisoned chalice. Afterwards, Stalin never lived in Tiflis or Georgia again. The fate of Kamo would be insanely bizarre. The quest for the cash – some of which, it turned out, was in marked notes – would be tangled, but even these astonishing twists were far from the end of the matter for Stalin. The heist’s success was almost a disaster for him. The robbery’s global notoriety became a powerful weapon against Lenin, and against Stalin personally.

The gangsters fell out over the spoils. Lenin and his comrades fought for possession of the cash like rats in a cage. His enemies spent the next three years launching three separate Party investigations hoping to ruin him. Stalin, *persona non grata* in Georgia, tainted by the brazen flouting of Party rules and this reckless carnage, was expelled from the Party by the Tiflis Committee. This was a blot that could have derailed his bid to succeed Lenin and spoiled his ambition to become a Russian statesman and a supreme pontiff of Marxism. It was so sensitive that even in 1918 Stalin launched an extraordinary libel case to suppress the story.\* His career as gangster godfather, audacious bank-robber, killer, pirate and arsonist, though whispered at home and much enjoyed by critics abroad, remained hidden until the twenty-first century.

In another sense, the Tiflis spectacular was the making of him. Stalin had now proved himself, not only as a gifted politician but also as a ruthless man of action, to the one patron who really counted. Lenin decided that Stalin was ‘exactly the kind of person I need’.

Stalin, his wife and baby vanished from Tiflis two days later – but it was far from his last heist. There were new worlds to conquer – Baku, the greatest oil city in the world, St Petersburg the capital, and vast Russia herself. Indeed Stalin, the Georgian child raised rough on the violent, clannish streets of a turbulent town that was the bank-robbery capital of the Empire, now stepped, for the first time, on to the Russian stage. He never looked back.

Yet he was on the eve of a personal tragedy which helped transform this murderous egomaniac into the supreme politician for whom no prize, no challenge and no cost in human life would be too great to realize his personal ambitions and his utopian dreams.<sup>18</sup>

\*In the 1920s, before he was dictator, Stalin went to remarkable lengths to conceal his role in the expropriations. In 1923–4, his chief gangster, Kote Tsintsadze, by then in opposition to Stalin, published his memoirs in a small Georgian journal. They were republished in 1927 but afterwards the pages involving Stalin’s part in assassinations and robberies were removed, a process continuing in the 1930s under Beria. Today, they are extremely hard to find.

