In September 1957, four years after her father died, Svetlana Stalina began to use her mother's name, Alliluyeva. The metallic sound of the name Stalin, she said, lacerated her heart.

Ten years later, at the height of the Cold War, Alliluyeva sparked an international incident by defecting to the United States. In “Twenty Letters to a Friend,” the memoir she published in 1967, Alliluyeva repudiated communism, compared Stalin's regime to the reign of Ivan the Terrible, romanticized her mother, Nadya (who had committed suicide in 1932 when Svetlana was 6 years old), and expressed the hope that as they read about their country's history with feelings of “pain, contrition and bewilderment,” the next generation of Russians would summon the strength to live their lives differently.

In “Stalin’s Daughter,” Rosemary Sullivan, a professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, draws on CIA, KGB and Soviet government documents, and interviews with Svetlana’s youngest daughter, to provide a detailed, sensitive and largely sympathetic account of Alliluyeva’s turbulent and tragic life.

Through multiple marriages, lots of love affairs, a defection, a brief return to the Soviet Union and yet another about-face, Sullivan demonstrates, Svetlana remained tethered to and tortured by her connection to Josef Stalin. In her last interview in 2010, Sullivan indicates, Alliluyeva, who by then was bent by scoliosis and living in poverty, told British journalist David Jones that she would not forgive her father: “If he could kill so many people, including my uncles...”
and aunts, I will never forgive him. Never! ... He broke my life. I want to explain to you, he broke my life!"

Stalin, Sullivan reminds us, was a monster. The Great Terror over which he presided (through the collectivization of agriculture and the purges of Communist Party members) resulted in the exile, imprisonment and death of millions and millions of citizens of the Soviet Union. And Stalin refused to save (or targeted) Nadya's close relatives "who had the misfortune to move in the circles of power that overlapped with those designated for liquidation."

The impact on Svetlana, who was barely a teenager in the late 1930s, was devastating. She witnessed at first hand her father’s complicity in grotesque and gratuitous crimes. At the same time, Svetlana, a lonely, motherless child, craved Stalin’s attention, approval and assistance. She would spend a lifetime, Sullivan writes, "trying to rip off the mask of compliance she invented for him." And when she succeeded, she would find it "slipping back over her face."

Alliluyeva, Sullivan emphasizes, had ample reasons to be emotionally volatile and even paranoid.

The pressures of living as Stalin’s daughter, then, produced two dominant and contradictory behavioral modes: abject submission and all-out rebellion. Svetlana’s identity, Sullivan notes, also made her a shuttlecock in the deadly serious game of Cold War power politics. When in the United States, she was expected to issue wholesale condemnations of the U.S.S.R. — and vice versa.

The game, Sullivan suggests, was all the more terrible because it poisoned her closest personal relationships and private memories. In 1975, for example, George Kennan, the author of the Cold War doctrine of containment, received in a diplomatic pouch a letter from an unidentified American journalist who claimed that Svetlana’s son, Joseph, who had denounced her for defecting, now wished to visit her in the United States. Suspecting that the communication might be a KGB trap, Kennan advised Svetlana not to try to contact Joseph. Although "her motherly heart [was] wrung," she took his advice, concluding, "we have to wait for better times, when good things will be possible." As it turned out, albeit for complicated reasons, she was probably right.

As she grew older, Svetlana’s paranoia became increasingly evident. She worried that Soviet experiments into microwave radiation might be responsible for her headaches, disorientation and depression. And she began to believe that as part of a plan to rehabilitate Stalin, Vladimir Putin might bring her back to Russia, against her will, or find a way to repatriate her remains.

Sullivan maintains, rather less persuasively, that there was a logic — a quintessentially Russian logic — to her paranoia and that "perhaps for everyone in old age the world constricts and fear expands to fill the small circle of one’s existence."

In the end, Svetlana Alliluyeva was, indeed, caught in a paradox. Readers were interested only in what Sullivan calls “the Kremlin Svetlana,” but she adamantly refused to be her father’s biographer. Her manuscript, “The Faraway Music,” a narrative of her life in America, had some lyrical moments, but no one in the U.S. wanted to publish it.

Svetlana could change her name, but she could not escape the associations attached to it and to her. When she died in 2011, her daughter scattered her ashes in the Pacific Ocean.

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Stalin's Daughter

The Extraordinary and Tumultuous Life of Svetlana Alliluyeva

By Rosemary Sullivan

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