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| People & Events**Joseph Stalin, (1879 - 1953)** Soviet leader Joseph Stalin first heard officially from the Americans about their atomic bomb at the Potsdam Conference on July 24, 1945. President Truman told him that we have, "a new weapon of unusual destructive force." Truman didn't specifically call it an atomic bomb, and Stalin didn't ask for further details. Witnesses say the Soviet leader merely nodded his head. It's not clear whether Stalin failed to understand what Truman was talking about or whether he didn't want to reveal the backwardness of the Soviet bomb project. In any event, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6th made the disparity between the Soviet and American programs plain. A British journalist in Moscow wrote: "the news [of Hiroshima] had an acutely depressing effect on everybody. It was clearly realized that this was a New Fact in the world's power politics, that the bomb constituted a threat to Russia." Within weeks, Stalin issued a decree that made the development of the atomic bomb a top priority. The Soviet leader was prepared to allocate huge resources to the nuclear program at a time when his country lay in ruins. "If a child does not cry," he told Igor Kurchatov, the scientific director of the project, "the mother doesn't understand what he needs. Ask for anything you like. You will not be turned down." His order deflected economic assistance from a population that desperately needed it. At least 26 million Soviet citizens had been killed during the war, another 25 million were homeless and the major industrial cities had been flattened by the fighting. By 1945, Stalin had already established himself as a brutal tyrant capable of inflicting terrible suffering on the Soviet people. Within five years of Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin had managed to firmly entrench himself in the role of indisputable ruler of the Soviet Union. His brutality was unremitting. In the late twenties, when agricultural production didn't meet expectations, he expropriated grain from peasants causing a widespread famine. In the 1930s, he launched a reign of political terror that led to purges, arrests, deportations and executions. And he stage-managed show trials of his former political rivals who were put to death. All told, thousands of party, industrial, and military leaders disappeared during his "Great Terror." During the immediate post-war years, Stalin was determined not to allow the U.S. monopoly of the atomic bomb to influence the course of international affairs. If anything the Americans' possession of the weapon, made Stalin more obdurate. In September 1946 he told a British journalist that "Atomic bombs are meant to frighten those with weak nerves." He went on to concede that the bomb did, of course, create a threat, but he warned, "monopoly ownership of the atomic bomb cannot last for long." And he was right, it didn't. On August 29, 1949, at least a year before the American scientists expected, the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb. In the last years of Stalin's life, he once more gave way to his excessive paranoia. On one occasion he even said, "I'm finished. I trust no one, not even myself." In January 1953, he instigated the arrest of many Moscow doctors, most of whom were Jewish, on charges that they had committed medical assassinations. The so-called doctor's plot seemed to be the beginning of a new reign of terror. But Stalin's unexpected death in March averted the return to the terror of the '30s.  |