

Stalin's Story

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1 Preface to the Ronnie-edition

The game text you are currently reading is not the end product of a design process. It is merely an alpha version, which means that it will have to be tested and developed further before it reaches its final form.

Stalin's story is my entry for the November 2005 Ronnies. This is a roleplaying game design competition held by Ron Edwards, in which the participants have exactly 24 hours to create a game text. Every word in this document has been written within the space of 24 hours – which explains why it has not been polished and thoroughly tested.

In addition to writing the game within 24 hours, the participant also has to use two terms from a list of four terms as central concepts in his game. For the November 2005 Ronnies, the terms were: dragon, gun, mud and Soviet. *Stalin's Story* has been based on **dragon** and **Soviet**. The other two terms may not be central to the experience of play at all; guns and mud, therefore, should play no role in the game and the designer is supposed to actively exclude them.

Have fun reading the game. And, who knows, have fun playing it!

2 Stalin wants a story

It is 1928, and Stalin has retreated to his personal chambers. In the world outside, his agricultural reforms have been unsuccessful, leading to a food crisis. He doesn't want to hear a word about that. The peasants are hiding the scarce food from the state collectors, and it is only at gunpoint that they are 'willing' to give it up. But Stalin doesn't want to hear a word about that either.

What he *does* want to hear is an old Russian folk tale of the kind his mother used to tell him. A tale of a poor boy going out into the world to slay a dragon and win the hand of a princess, as simple as that, nothing fancy. Especially nothing fancy.

To that end, Stalin has invited some of his closest companions to join him in his sitting room. Also present is a troupe of actors, ordered at a moment's notice to come and improvise a fairy tale for the pleasure of their great leader.

Everybody is on their toes. In these times of crisis, it is only too easy to displease Stalin. And if you displease Stalin, bad things happen to you.

And so the actors play their tale, and the courtiers scheme for power and favour, and Stalin – capricious and inscrutable – decides over life and death.

3 Overview of play

You need one reasonably sized sitting room, at least four but preferably six to eight players, a set of *role cards* and a set of *story cards*. First, the *role cards* are used to assign a role to each of the players: actor, courtier or Stalin. Then, Stalin designates how the chairs and couches are to be placed and who is allowed to sit where. There should be enough empty space for the actors to play out the fairy tale. There should also be a clock visible for everyone.

Next, everybody except Stalin is dealt several *story cards*. The story cards describe possible scenes for the fairy tale, and both the actors and the courtiers will use them to shape the story – but also to raise the ire of the great dictator against the others. After all, if one person has to bear the brunt of Stalin’s rage, it had better not be you.

At the end, when the story has been brought to a conclusion, Stalin will judge whether he did or did not enjoy the story. Woe be unto the actors if he did not; woe be unto the courtiers if he did.

4 Preparation

Assigning roles

Take a number of *role cards* depending on the number of players, using the following table:

Number of players	Stalin	Courtiers	Actors
4	1	1	2
5	1	2	2
6	1	2	3
7	1	3	3
8	1	3	4

Shuffle the cards, and deal one card to each player, face up. This card assigns the role that the player will take on for the rest of the game.

- Each *courtier* may tell, in a few sentences, who he is and what his tasks are at Stalin's court. If the player is male he might for example be a general, a politician, an ideologist, or an advisor. If the player is female, she could be the wife of an important public person, or perhaps someone's mistress - even Stalin's mistress. A courtier's name is always the name of the player.
- The actors must choose a leader. They are not allowed to elaborate on the background of their characters. An actor's name is always the name of the player.
- Stalin is, simply, Stalin. From this point onwards, the player who got the Stalin card is in charge.

Dealing the story cards

Stalin orders someone to deal the *story cards*. Shuffle them, and deal each player a number of cards, face down. The following table show how many cards everyone should get:

Number of players	Courtiers	Actors
4	8	8
5	6	7
6	5	5
7	4	5
8	4	4

Stalin never gets any *story cards*. If you play the game with six players, both courtiers and all three actors will get five *story cards*. This leaves six

cards undealt; these are put aside, face down, and will not be used in the current game.

The players should not allow each other to see their *story cards*, but they should look at their own.

Preparing the lair

Now, you may need to rearrange the furniture a bit. Stalin and his courtiers should be able to sit, while the actors need room to act out the fairy tale. Rearrangements of the furniture are made under the supervision of Stalin, but the other players do all the work. When the rearrangements have been made to Stalin's satisfaction, he chooses a place to sit – preferably the most comfortable chair or couch – and tells the courtiers where they are to sit. (Which could as easily be on the floor as on an actual chair.)

Perhaps Stalin wants some other preparations to be taken, and it is expected that he orders the other players around and they do what he asks. Making tea, giving vodka to Stalin and the courtiers – or to Stalin alone –, turning off the music, turning on the music (I suggest Shostakovich), changing the illumination, are all good tasks. When Stalin is quite satisfied and all the courtiers have taken their designated seats, the game begins.

5 Acting the part

Two overarching rules

Before discussing how to play the game, I will state two rules, called the ‘first rule’ (because it is the most important) and the ‘zeroth rule’ (because it is even more important).

The first rule: Whatever the rules of the game say, Stalin can overrule them. His words are law. His commands, whatever they are, must be obeyed.

The zeroth rule: At any time, any player can step out of the game. (This is fictionally interpreted as the OGPU – the secret police – respectfully entering Stalin’s chambers and removing from his presence a counter-revolutionary saboteur.) Stepping out of the game has two consequences: first, the player can no longer participate in the game; second, all obligations imposed by the first rule are immediately lifted.

Within the game, Stalin is almighty and has totalitarian control; but a player can always stop playing the game and regain his or her freedom.

Understanding the story cards

On each *story card* you will notice the following elements:

- A title. (“Absention”)
- A number. (“1”)
- A gorgeous illustration.
- A broad description of what happens in the fairy tale. (“The poor boy leaves his home.”)
- Possibly, a list of numbers called *Must follow*.
- Possibly, a list of numbers called *Blocked by*.
- Possibly, a *Special* section.

What does all of this mean? The *title* is simply what the card is called. Each card has a unique *number*, which indicates when during the story the card may be played. In general, the **rule of succession** holds: a card can follow cards that have a lower number, but not cards that have a higher number. So card 2 could be played after card 1, but card 1 could not be played after card 2.

This rule of succession is made somewhat more complicated by the *Must follow* and the *Blocked by* categories. If there are numbers in the *Must follow* category, then the card *can only* be played if the previous card had one of those numbers. If there are numbers in the *Blocked by* category, the card *cannot* be played if any card with one of those numbers has previously been played.

Whenever a card is played, the actors must act out a scene that corresponds with the description. If the description is “The hero, a poor boy, leaves his home.”, then the actors must play out a scene wherein the poor boy does leave his home.

Very important is the *Special* section, for its contents generally allow the player who has played the card to do something that may raise his favour in Stalin’s eyes, or may lower the standing of some other player. If the *Special* section says: “Within the next ten minutes, you may make an accusation against one of the other players, and he or she is not allowed to deny it,” then that is exactly what you are allowed to do.

Playing a story card

Whenever a scene has come to a natural close, everybody can attempt to play a *story card*. You do this by visibly presenting the card to the rest of the players. There are two constraints:

- No player can play two *story cards* in a row. So if player *A* played the previous card, he cannot attempt to play the current card.
- No courtier is allowed to play a card if the previous card was also played by a courtier. So between two cards played by courtiers, there must always be at least one card played by an actor.

Nevertheless, it will often happen that several people want to play a card at the same time. There are two rules which determine who is allowed to play his or her card:

1. If any of the players is trying to play a card the number of which is five or more points higher than one of the other cards, he must stop his attempt and return the card to his hand.
2. If there still is more than one player trying to play a card, each of them should argue – *in character* – for the superiority of their choice. Don’t spend minutes trying to outdo each other in thinking up reasons; if you can make your point in one sentence, so much the better. Then, Stalin points to the person who may play his card. He always has the final call.

And remember, all of the previous rules can be overruled by Stalin, if he so wishes.

Once a winner is designated, he reads aloud the *Special* section of the card, and announces his choice if appropriate. If the *Special* section is “Within the next ten minutes, you may make an accusation against one of the other players, and he or she is not allowed to deny it.”, the player need not decide right away against whom he is going to use this power. If the *Special* section is “Point to a player. He must praise you, non-sarcastically, for your loyalty to the revolution.”, you should point right away at the person whom you want to be so inflicted.

Narrating the fairy tale

After the *Special* section has been read, the player of the card gives it to the leader of the actors. The leader then assigns roles to his players, possibly leaving some of them out if there are not enough roles, probably giving himself a role too. No further discussion among the actors is allowed: they have to improvise a story until the demands of the card have been fulfilled and the leader calls for the next scene or somebody tries to play a new card.

Playing the scene is not merely narrating the scene. Though one of the roles the leader can assign is that of ‘narrator’, a person standing apart from the other actors and introducing the scene or giving comments, in principle people should *play* their roles, just like real actors. In this respect, *Stalin’s story* is more akin to live-action roleplaying than to tabletop roleplaying.

If at any time the leader of the actors is killed or taken away by the secret police, the actors must immediately choose a new leader.

Concerning the story, remember that the hero is a poor boy who will have to face all kinds of trouble before finally defeating the dragon. Then, he will have to face off against a rival, the false hero, who also claims to have killed the dragon. After exposing the false hero, the hero marries the princess. The dragon himself may not be passive, and there may be scenes focussing on him. If so, it might be useful to assume that dragons can assume human form at will, and roam the land disguised as a human.

If the scene you have to play doesn’t seem a logical consequence of the foregoing scene, but assumes that something has happened in between, you should play out those implicitly assumed events in the current scene. A *story card* states what must necessarily happen in the scene, but many other things may happen in addition.

Beyond the fairy tale

We all know what will happen in the story: the poor boy will eventually defeat the dragon. The real tension exists not in the fictional world of the fairy tale, but in the world of Stalin, the courtiers and the actors.

For the *actors*, this is the most important day in their lives. If they succeed in pleasing Stalin with their performance, he may give them huge promotions, perhaps even allow them to become his new courtiers. But if they fail to please him, a swift death is all they can hope for. So what they will be trying is to avoid displeasing Stalin as much as they can, even though the courtiers will be hindering them at every opportunity. And if the performance goes badly, it might be a good idea to let one of your fellow actors take the blame.

For the *courtiers*, this is just another day of intrigue. And just like every other day, when you wake in the morning you have no idea whether the evening will see you as Stalin's best friend or standing before a firing squad. The courtiers will be trying to ensure that Stalin doesn't like the actors, for if he does, that means more rivals and thus more danger. It is also a good idea to make Stalin suspicious of other courtiers: less rivals means less danger.

You can really do anything at any time, as long as you obey Stalin's every word. The *Special* sections of cards never give you powers you didn't have before, but force other people to act in a certain way. "Within the next ten minutes, you may make an accusation against one of the other players, and he or she is not allowed to deny it." is a case in point: you can always make accusations, but this card forbids the other player from reacting in a certain way.

What gives the scheming its immediate relevance is the **rule of death**:

At the end of each game, Stalin must have sentenced at least one person to death.

You had better make sure it is not you.

6 Stalin's favour

In the end, then, it all comes down to gaining Stalin's favour. The tactical and ruthless use of *story cards* will help you to put other players in a bad light, and your general behaviour will certainly influence the person wearing Stalin's (metaphorical) crown. But in the end, the rules cannot help you. You don't gain points during play that will make you immune against Stalin's wrath. You are fully and utterly at his mercy, and his reasons for granting you life or punishing you with death may be beyond human comprehension. Until it is too late, you will never know if your best is good enough – and yet you can do nothing but your best.

As Stalin, make yourself comfortable. Act the way you want: it's all your show. If somebody irritates you, tell him to shut up for the next ten minutes. Interfere with the attempts of the actors to stage a play. React to the schemes of your courtiers, or baffle them by not reacting at all. Give people pointless orders. And don't forget: at the end of the game, you should have condemned at least one person to death. (Banishment to the Gulag Archipelago could also be considered.) If you didn't enjoy the play, you may wish to punish at least one actor. If you did enjoy it, why not raise one of them to the status of courtier – replacing, obviously, one whom has fallen out of favour.

I suggest that you swiftly punish anyone who puts an anachronism in the fairy tale, such as, say, a gun. And that you punish even swifter anyone who dares to mention agriculture. But like everything else in these rules, you can disregard this at will.

You are the dragon. Watch the mortals tremble in fear.

7 Design notes

This roleplaying game is heavily based on Vladimir Propp's 1928 book *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, in which he analysed the narrative structure of over a hundred Russian fairy tales and concluded that they all consisted of combinations of a relatively limited set of structural units, which could only be linked together in specific ways. The *story cards* of *Stalin's story* are almost one-on-one related to the structural functions of Propp.

The idea of basing a roleplaying game on Propp's structuralist analysis of Russian folk tales had been with me for a long time, but I had never been able to see how I could ensure that it became a roleplaying game instead of a storytelling game. When I saw the Ronnie keywords 'dragon' and 'Soviet', I immediately remembered this idea and thought that the Ronnies would be an excellent opportunity to actually do something with it.

However, the keyword was 'Soviet', not 'Russia' – how could I work this into the game concept? My first thought was to have the game be a verbal battle between a writer and a censor standing before a tribunal of judges, the writer trying to show that his tale celebrated the socialist revolution, the censor trying to show that it was subversive and bourgeois. I later changed this into the current game concept: a roleplaying game containing a storytelling game.

You will notice that the theatrical performance of the actors as well as the scheming of the courtiers (and the actors) is bound by strict rules, while at the same time, Stalin is bound by no rules at all except (in a sense) the zeroth rule. Indeed, Stalin can even overrule the rules binding the other players. This is intentional. The boy in the fairy tale is certain of defeating the dragon because of the rules of his fictional world, but in our harsh reality the dragon of despotism makes and breaks the rules at will – and the hero may always be crushed underneath its massive paws.

8 Appendix: the cards

A final version of *Stalin's story* would, of course, contain beautifully illustrated, real, physical cards. The eight *role cards* would be the size of normal playing cards; one showing Stalin, four showing actors and three showing courtiers. The 31 *story cards* would be much bigger, A5-format, and made of stronger material. They have to be visible across the room, so everybody can see which card is being played. This appendix will detail what information will be contained on each of the *story cards*.

1. • **Absention**
 - *Description:* The hero, a poor boy, temporarily leaves his home.
 - *Special:* At your call, any time during the game but once only, a player of your choice must leave the room for five minutes.
2. • **Interdiction**
 - *Description:* The hero receives a warning not to go somewhere.
 - *Special:* Choose a courtier. He is allowed to make an interdiction to the actors that they have to obey for the rest of the game.
3. • **Violation**
 - *Description:* Through choice or chance, the hero nevertheless does go to this place.
 - *Must follow:* 2
 - *Special:* One of the actors is allowed to disobey the interdiction for the rest of the game.
4. • **Reconnaissance**
 - *Description:* The dragon tries to get information about the hero.
 - *Special:* Choose one player. Look at his or her *story cards*, returning them before the next opportunity to play them.
5. • **Delivery**
 - *Description:* *The dragon gains information about the hero.*
 - *Must follow:* 4
 - *Special:* Choose one player. Look at his or her *story cards*, and take one.
6. • **Trickery**
 - *Description:* The dragon attempts to trick the hero into helping him.

- *Special:* Once during the game, while someone else is accusing or threatening you, point to another player. (Not the accuser.) He must defend you against the accuser.
7.
 - **Complicity**
 - *Description:* The hero is tricked, and unwittingly sets out to help the dragon.
 - *Must follow:* 6
 - *Special:* Choose a player. The next time he plays a *story card*, play the *Special* section as if *you* were the one who had played the card.
 8.
 - **Villainy**
 - *Description:* The dragon harms a member of the hero's family.
 - *Special:* Choose a player and a family member ('wife', 'brother', something like that). It is now a fictional fact that that family member of that player's character was arrested by the secret police yesterday.
 9.
 - **Lack**
 - *Description:* A member of the hero's family lacks something or desires something.
 - *Blocked by:* 8
 - *Special:* Choose a player and a family member ('wife', 'brother', something like that). It is now a fictional fact that that player's character needs Stalin's allowance to send this very ill family member to a Western hospital.
 10.
 - **Mediation**
 - *Description:* The hero hears about harm done to his family or a lack experienced by his family, and sets out to solve the problem.
 - *Special:* Choose a player, and make a request to him that can really only be granted by Stalin. He must now mediate between you, doing his best to have the request granted.
 11.
 - **Departure**
 - *Description:* The hero leaves his home to undertake a dangerous quest.
 - *Special:* A player of your choice must make a request to Stalin, within the next ten minutes, that comes down to asking for the temporary suspension of one of the game rules.
 12.
 - **Test**

- *Description:* The hero is tested, interrogated or attacked by someone who may help him later.
 - *Special:* Within the next ten minutes, you may make an accusation against one of the other players, and he or she is not allowed to deny it.
13. • **Withstanding the test**
- *Description:* The hero succeeds at the test.
 - *Must follow:* 12
 - *Special:* Your loyalty to the revolution is well known. For ten minutes, nobody can accuse you of being disloyal.
14. • **Failing the test**
- *Description:* The hero fails at the test.
 - *Must follow:* 12
 - *Blocked by:* 13
 - *Special:* Point to one of the players. It is now a well known fact that in his youth, he used to be an anarchist.
15. • **Receipt**
- *Description:* The hero receives a magical object or companion to help him on his quest.
 - *Must follow:* 11, 12, 13, 14
 - *Special:* Point to one of the players. The two of you cannot scheme against each other for the next ten minutes.
16. • **Struggle**
- *Description:* The hero and the dragon join in direct combat – which ends, for now, unresolved.
 - *Special:* Within the next five minutes, point to two players. They must immediately get into a verbal conflict, and cannot stop before Stalin intervenes.
17. • **Branding**
- *Description:* The hero is wounded or marked, or receives a characteristic object.
 - *Special:* Point to one of the players. It is now a well known fact that his father was a rich banker and capitalist.
18. • **Victory**
- *Description:* The dragon is slain by the hero.

- *Special:* Start an argument with one of the other players. He must let you win.
19. • **Resolution**
- *Description:* The original misfortune or lack that got the hero to adventure is resolved.
 - *Special:* One obligation put onto you by a *Special* section is lifted. If you have more than one obligation, it is your choice which is lifted.
20. • **Return**
- *Description:* The hero sets of on the journey back to his home.
 - *Special:* Swap your story cards with those of another player of your choice.
21. • **Pursuit**
- *Description:* The hero is pursued, and perhaps attacked, by the false hero.
 - *Special:* The actors must give the false hero the real name of the player playing Stalin. If you are an actor, point to one of the courtiers: it must be his suggestion.
22. • **Rescue**
- *Description:* The hero is rescued from his pursuer, the false hero.
 - *Must follow:* 21
 - *Special:* For the next ten minutes, one player of your choice must do his best to defend you against your enemies.
23. • **Unrecognised arrival**
- *Description:* The hero arrives at the king's palace, but is not recognised as the slayer of the dragon.
 - *Special:* Point to one of the players. It is now fictionally true that he is a member of the secret police. You may point to yourself.
24. • **Unfounded claims**
- *Description:* The false hero claims that it was he who has slain the dragon, and asks for the hand of the princess. The hero speaks out against this.
 - *Special:* Point to a player, and then to a second player. The first player must immediately accuse the second one of preposterous crimes of which the second player is, in fact, innocent.
25. • **Difficult task**

- *Description:* The hero and the false hero, having presented competing claims as to who slew the dragon, are asked by the king to perform a difficult task.
 - *Special:* Give one of the actors a command. You must be obeyed.
26. • **Solution**
- *Description:* The hero resolves a difficult task.
 - *Special:* All obligations lying on your shoulders are lifted.
27. • **Recognition**
- *Description:* The hero is recognised as the true hero.
 - *Special:* Point to a player. He must praise you, non-sarcastically, for your loyalty to the revolution.
28. • **Exposure**
- *Description:* The false hero is exposed.
 - *Special:* Make an accusation against one of the other players. The accusation is true; but it need not be believed.
29. • **Transfiguration**
- *Description:* The hero is given a new appearance, magically or non-magically.
 - *Special:* Point to a player. If he is a courtier, he must stand up and start playing with the actors. If he is an actor, he must sit down next to the courtiers.
30. • **Punishment**
- *Description:* The false hero is punished.
 - *Special:* Point to one of the players. He must beg Stalin for mercy, on his knees – whether because he has committed some real crime or because of nerves is up to the begging player.
31. • **Wedding**
- *Description:* The hero and the princess get married. THE END.
 - *Special:* Point to two players. It is now fictionally true that they have fallen in love, and will try to protect each other from being executed.