

## C How did Stalin become party leader?

### FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Make notes on the way Stalin outmanoeuvred his opponents.
- 2 Add more details to your table of factors which helped Stalin and worked against his opponents, especially Trotsky.

Did Stalin have a long-term plan to achieve power, carefully worked out from the beginning of the 1920s, or did he take advantage of opportunities that presented themselves between 1923 and 1929? As you can see from Source 10.2, Westwood does not think Stalin had a long-term plan. What we can be sure of is that he was determined to defend his position in the power stakes and be an important player at the top of the Communist Party, because he began building his power base in the party from 1922 onwards.

**SOURCE 10.2** J. N. Westwood, *Endurance and Endeavour*, 1973, p. 287

*For the most part, the intrigues and manoeuvres of the contestants were motivated not so much by desire to get to the top as by the desire to keep rivals away from the top. Although Stalin seemed to win every trick, it is unlikely that he followed a long-term plan. He did not need to, he could stand back and watch his rivals dig their own graves, occasionally offering his spade to one or other of them.*

### 10C How did Stalin build up his power base?

It was Stalin's position in all the key party organisations – in the Politburo, in the Orgburo and Secretariat, and as General Secretary – that gave him control of the party organisation and membership and such an enormous amount of power



J.V. STALIN

#### Party Secretary

This position gave him control, to some extent, of the business of the Politburo. For example, drawing up agendas and papers for the Politburo meetings gave him control over what was discussed and what information other members received.

#### Positions in Orgburo and the Secretariat

These gave him control of appointments to positions of responsibility in the party structure. He could put his supporters in key positions. In particular, the party secretaries from regional to local party level were increasingly Stalin's men: party secretaries of regions like the Ukraine were very powerful and at lower levels could virtually decide how party members voted.

#### Control of the party organisation

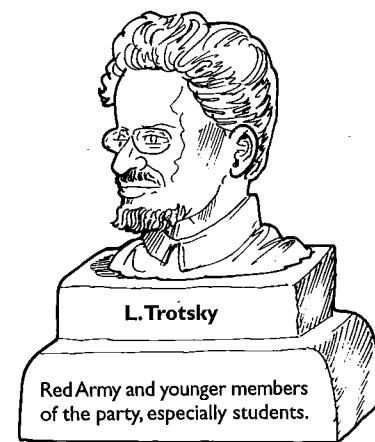
This meant that he could influence the selection of delegates who were sent to the annual party congress where major issues of policy were decided and the Central Committee was chosen. He could pack the congress with his supporters. This accounts for the hostile reception Trotsky received at conferences from 1924 onwards and the number of delegates who voted the way Stalin wanted. His ability to deliver votes in the congresses made him a valuable ally. This is why Zinoviev and Kamenev sought his support.

#### Control of party membership

This allowed him to get rid of the more radical elements – students and soldiers – who were likely to support Trotsky. Stalin supervised the 'Lenin Enrolment' of 1924 and 1925, in which the party almost doubled its membership to one million. The new members tended to be young urban workers, poorly educated ex-peasants who were not interested in ideological debate and were likely to do what their local party organiser told them to do. Stalin's practical policies based on nationalism appealed to them.

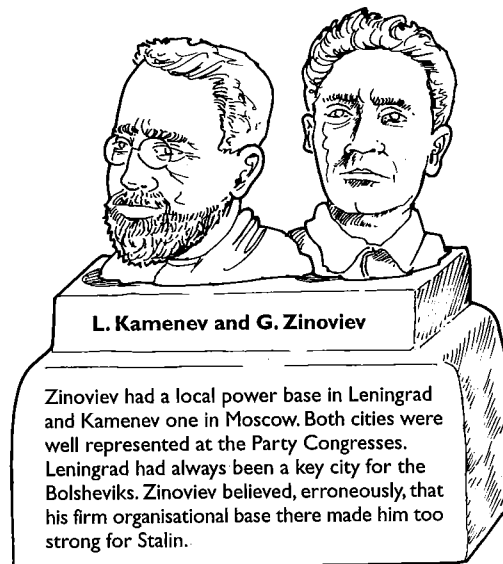
### 10D Power bases of other contenders

The other contenders had power bases but did not build up their support in the way Stalin did; they all made the mistake of underestimating Stalin.



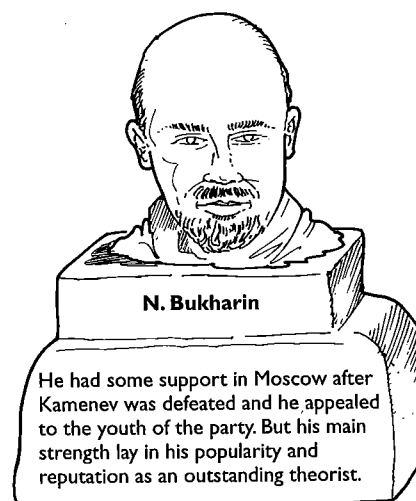
L. Trotsky

Red Army and younger members of the party, especially students.



L. Kamenev and G. Zinoviev

Zinoviev had a local power base in Leningrad and Kamenev one in Moscow. Both cities were well represented at the Party Congresses. Leningrad had always been a key city for the Bolsheviks. Zinoviev believed, erroneously, that his firm organisational base there made him too strong for Stalin.



N. Bukharin

He had some support in Moscow after Kamenev was defeated and he appealed to the youth of the party. But his main strength lay in his popularity and reputation as an outstanding theorist.

When studying how someone like Stalin came to power, there is a tendency to see the process as inevitable. We identify certain factors that helped the person to achieve power – for example, aspects of his character and personality, or weaknesses in, or wrong moves by, his opponents – and these seem to suggest that the end result was a foregone conclusion. But this is only with the benefit of hindsight. There were several points at which Stalin's ambitions might have been blocked. His position was not completely secure in 1929 and it was only by about 1937 that his position was virtually unassailable.

### ACTIVITY

Can you identify any points at which Stalin's career might have been stopped:

- a) when Lenin was alive
- b) during the power struggle?

# How significant is Lenin's contribution to history?

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Lenin died in January 1924, although for most of 1923 he was incapacitated by illness. In the last years of his life, he was concerned about the state of the party, the growing bureaucracy and the power of Stalin. His relationship with Stalin deteriorated in 1922 and it seemed likely that Stalin's power would be curtailed. But Lenin died before any changes could take place and it was Stalin who took the lead at his funeral and in developing the Lenin cult. Lenin's contribution to the Russian Revolution from 1917 to 1923 was enormous, but how significant is he in history? Did he really make a difference?

- A** Lenin's relationship with Stalin at the end of his life (pp. 172–173)
- B** Lenin's funeral and the Lenin cult (pp. 173–174)
- C** Summing up Lenin (pp. 175–176)
- D** Did Lenin make a difference? (pp. 177–180)

## A Lenin's relationship with Stalin at the end of his life

Lenin suffered a series of strokes from late 1921 until his death in January 1924. He was able to carry on working during 1922, but a major stroke in March 1923 left him without the power of speech. In 1922, he still had considerable influence but was removed from the onerous work of running the day-to-day business of government. He had time to think about the problems of the party. He became concerned about the extent of the party bureaucracy and increasingly aware of the power that Stalin had accrued to himself. He was particularly worried about the way Stalin had abused his power by intimidating and bullying the Communists who were governing Georgia. Lenin detected a dark side to Stalin that might present a danger to the party. He mounted an investigation into the Georgian affair that confirmed his fears. He also fell out with Stalin over the issue of the Soviet republics (see page 163).

After the second of his strokes in December 1922, Lenin wrote a testament, a 'Letter to the Party Congress' to be read after his death (see Source 9.1 on page 173). In it Lenin warned that Stalin had become too powerful and that he could not be trusted to use his power wisely. From this point onwards, Lenin did not trust the information with which Stalin provided him. How much Stalin knew about this is not certain, but he clearly perceived that relations with Lenin were not good and was anxious about the Georgian investigation.

Stalin's wife worked as a secretary for Lenin, living in his house while he was ill, and she provided a conduit of information about Lenin's contacts. Stalin found out about the increasingly warm correspondence between Trotsky and Lenin. They were working on plans to restore more democracy to the party and there seems little doubt that, if Lenin had survived a little longer, Stalin would have lost some of his key positions in the party. Stalin tried to see Lenin, but Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, would not let him visit. Stalin, in a telephone conversation, insulted her, using crude, abusive language. Lenin was upset by this and added a note to his testament which would have been very damaging to Stalin if made public.

### THE GREAT RUSSIAN CHAUVINIST AND THE GEORGIAN AFFAIR

During the Civil War Georgia had been run by Mensheviks. At the end of the war, the Red Army took control by force and Stalin – himself a Georgian – was sent to visit the area and see how the Bolsheviks in Georgia were managing. However, Stalin was insulted and shouted down at meetings by the Mensheviks, and accused of betraying his birthplace. Stalin, who never took kindly to slights and insults, took the Bolsheviks to task for being too weak on opposition groups. He threatened and bullied them to adopt a more aggressive policy. In one incident, a local Bolshevik leader was struck by Ordzhonikidze, one of Stalin's henchmen. Stalin believed that Russians should govern the peoples of the USSR from Moscow rather like the tsars had done. This is why Lenin called him the 'Great Russian chauvinist'.

## FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on the relationship between Lenin and Stalin at the end of Lenin's life using these questions to guide you:

- a) Why was Lenin concerned about Stalin?
- b) What was the Georgian affair?
- c) How did Lenin and Stalin's relationship deteriorate?
- d) What appears to have been the purpose of Lenin's testament?
- e) Who came out of the relationship the worst?

## TALKING POINTS

Chance or accident can be a significant factor in explaining events.

- 1 How does chance seem to have played a role in the succession to the Russian leadership?
- 2 Can you think of other examples when chance may have had a significant impact on historical events?

## FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes to explain:

- how Stalin used Lenin's funeral to his advantage
- what the cult of Leninism was and why Stalin encouraged it.

According to the historian Robert Conquest, Lenin was more than upset: 'He was in fact prepared for open hostilities ... One of Lenin's secretaries told Trotsky that Lenin was now preparing "a bomb" against Stalin; and Kamenev learned from another of the secretaries that Lenin had decided "to crush Stalin politically"' (*Stalin: Breaker of Nations*, 1991, page 104). But before this could happen, Lenin had another stroke on 7 March and never recovered the power of speech.

**SOURCE 9.1** Extracts from Lenin's testament, 25 December 1922

*Comrade Stalin, having become General Secretary, has immeasurable power concentrated in his hands, and I am not sure that he always knows how to use that power with sufficient caution. Comrade Trotsky, on the other hand ... is distinguished not only by his outstanding ability. He is personally perhaps the most capable man in the present C.C. [Central Committee], but he has displayed excessive self-assurance ... These two qualities of the two outstanding leaders of the present C.C. can inadvertently lead to a split ...*

*I shall not give further appraisals of the personal qualities of other members of the C.C. but recall that the October episode with Zinoviev and Kamenev was no accident, but neither can the blame for it be laid on them personally, any more than non-Bolshevism can upon Trotsky. Speaking of the young C.C. members I wish to say a few words about Bukharin ... Bukharin is not only a most valuable and major theorist of the Party; he is also rightly considered the favourite of the whole Party; but his theoretical views can only with the very greatest doubt be regarded as fully Marxist.*

[Postscript added 4 January 1923]

*Stalin is too rude, and this fault ... becomes unacceptable in the office of General Secretary. Therefore, I propose to the comrades that a way be found to remove Stalin from that post and replace him with someone else who differs from Stalin in all respects, someone more patient, more loyal, more polite, more considerate.*

## B Lenin's funeral and the Lenin cult

The unexpected news of Lenin's death led to widespread displays of public grief. Theatres and shops were closed for a week, while portraits of Lenin draped in red and black were displayed in windows. Over three days, three and a half million people queued for hours to file past his body lying in state. However much they hated the regime the people seemed to have a genuine affection for Lenin, much as they had had for the tsars.

Stalin made the most of Lenin's funeral to advance his position in the party. Just before Lenin's death, Trotsky was ill and had set out to the south of Russia for a rest-holiday. Stalin contacted him and told him that he (Trotsky) would not be able to get back in time for the funeral. So Trotsky did not attend and it looked as though he could not be bothered to turn up. His reputation and political prestige were severely damaged by his non-attendance. Stalin, on the other hand, acted as one of the pallbearers and made a speech in which he appeared to be taking on the mantle of Leninism (see Source 9.2 below). Stalin hoped to transfer to himself the prestige, respect and loyalty associated with Lenin. He set himself up as Lenin's disciple, the person who would carry on Lenin's work. He was already thinking of the looming power struggle.

**SOURCE 9.2** J. V. Stalin, *Collected Works*. These are extracts from Stalin's speech at Lenin's funeral

*There is nothing higher than the calling of the member of a Party whose founder and leader is Comrade Lenin ... Leaving us, Comrade Lenin ordered us to hold high and keep pure the great title of member of the Party. We vow to thee Comrade Lenin, that we shall honourably fulfil this commandment ... Leaving us, Comrade Lenin enjoined us to keep the unity of the Party like the apple of our eye. We vow to thee, Comrade Lenin. That we will honourably fulfil this, thy commandment ...*