

Stalin's Rise to Power

The struggle to succeed Lenin originated not with his death in 1924 but from 1922 when he suffered the first of a succession of strokes and was increasingly incapacitated. By 1929, Josef Stalin had emerged as the sole leader of the Communist Party but back in the early 1920s few Russians would have predicted his rise to power.

Q. How was Stalin able to secure the Party leadership?

- i. Stalin was a member of the Politburo and Orgburo, the top committees within the Party and **he held several powerful positions within the Party apparatus**; in particular, Lenin appointed him General Secretary in 1922. He was able to use this to develop a power base within the Party, as he could promote and dismiss influential Party officials, particularly local Party secretaries. Stalin realised that the key to power lay in control over the Party organisation, rather than within state institutions. The Party grew rapidly, numbering 800,000 by 1925 and over 1.5 million by 1929. As its membership expanded, control over it became increasingly centralised, concentrating enormous power in Stalin's hands. Trotsky, Stalin's main rival for the leadership, held no significant position within the Party apparatus and so was unable to develop his own power base to compete with Stalin.
- ii. **Stalin's rivals underestimated him.** Lacking the charisma or the oratorical brilliance of Trotsky, the other leading figures in the Party ignored the 'grey blur', as Stalin was once dubbed, and concentrated their efforts on preventing Trotsky from gaining control over the Party.
- iii. **Stalin was a very skilful political operator** and was able to play off different factions within the Party leadership against each other.

These divisions were partly the result of:

- **personal rivalries**, for example, Kamenev and Zinoviev resented Trotsky's arrogance and were prepared to work with Stalin against Trotsky in the period 1922-25. During this period, Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev formed a three-man leadership team, known as the 'triumvirate' or 'troika'. They combined to force Trotsky's resignation as Commissar for War in 1925. Only in 1926 did Zinoviev and Kamenev decide to work with Trotsky in the so-called 'United Opposition'; but by then it was too late to prevent Stalin removing them from the Politburo.
- **major policy disagreements** within the Party. The Party was split over whether to continue with NEP or not. From 1923, those on the Left of the Party (e.g. Trotsky and Zinoviev) believed NEP should be replaced by rapid industrialisation and a move towards collectivisation of agriculture, whereas those on the Right (chiefly Bukharin) argued that NEP was working and should be maintained.

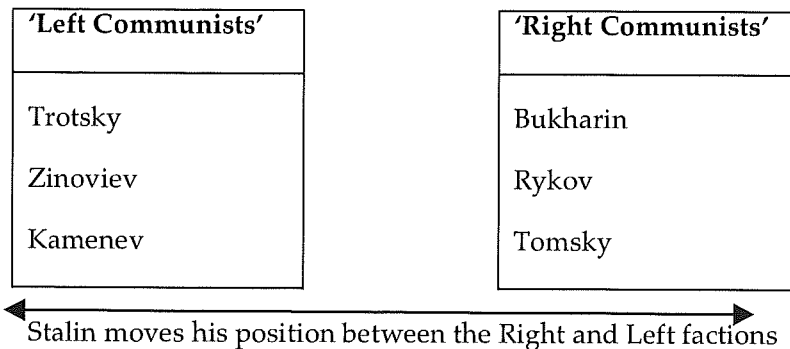
The other key policy dispute was over the issue of promoting worldwide revolution. The Left, particularly Trotsky, favoured 'Permanent Revolution', seeing international revolution as essential to the survival of socialism in Russia. By contrast, the Right adopted the slogan 'Socialism in One Country', arguing that, having witnessed the

suppression of communist revolutions in Germany and Hungary, international revolution was not possible for the foreseeable future and so the Russian Communist Party must focus on establishing a socialist economy at home.

Stalin began by supporting the Right against the Left on the question of NEP and he used the support of the Right to remove the Left from the Politburo in 1926. Then from 1928, Stalin turned on the Right and attacked NEP, urging the Party to adopt rapid industrialisation and forced collectivisation. In 1929-30, the Right (Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsy) were removed from the Politburo and replaced by supporters of Stalin.

- iv. **Stalin was also much better than his rivals at gauging the mood of the ordinary Party members.** He realised that in the mid-1920s the Party had little interest in exporting revolution abroad, weary as it was after the upheavals of 1917-21, and that most of the Party thought that NEP was a success in permitting economic recovery. Equally, Stalin judged correctly that most Communists had, by 1928-29, began to have serious reservations about NEP because economic growth was slowing down and the peasants were withholding grain from the markets in an attempt to force prices up. By the late 1920s, many in the Party were impatient to launch more socialist economic policies, such as collectivisation of agriculture, and wanted to transform the USSR into a modern industrial state.
- v. **Stalin was able to outmanoeuvre Trotsky** by appearing as the chief mourner at Lenin's funeral (having misled Trotsky about its date) and then by promoting himself as the true heir of Lenin.
- vi. **Trotsky's health was poor** in 1924-25, just when he needed to be at his strongest as the power struggle developed.
- vii. **Stalin was fortunate** in that, following Lenin's death in January 1924, the **Central Committee decided not to publish Lenin's *Political Testament*** in which Lenin had been deeply critical of Stalin (and somewhat less so of other leading Communists) and had recommended Stalin's dismissal as General Secretary.
- viii. **Stalin was able to use the Resolution on Party Unity (1921) to silence his opponents** within the top echelons of the Party, by branding them as factions seeking to undermine Party unity. So first Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev were branded the 'Left Opposition' and later Bukharin, Tomsy and Rykov were labelled the 'Right Opposition'.

The Politburo 1924-26



The Struggle to Succeed Lenin

1922	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stalin appointed General Secretary of the Party • Lenin suffered two strokes • Triumvirate of Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev formed collective leadership • Lenin wrote his Political Testament
1923	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lenin added postscript to Political Testament, calling for Stalin's removal as General Secretary • 'Scissors Crisis' led Trotsky and others on the Left to question NEP
1924	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lenin's death • Central Committee suppressed Lenin's Political Testament
1925	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trotsky resigned as War Commissar • Party Congress endorsed NEP and Socialism in One Country • Zinoviev and Kamenev began to oppose Stalin
1926	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United Opposition of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev • United Opposition removed from the Politburo • Voroshilov and other allies of Stalin joined the Politburo
1927	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zinoviev, Kamenev and Trotsky were expelled from the Party • Grain procurement crisis began as peasants withheld grain
1928	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grain procurement crisis continued • Stalin responded by requisitioning grain in the so-called 'Urals-Siberia method' • Bread rationing introduced in Moscow and Leningrad • First Five Year Plan introduced; NEP abandoned
1929/30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Party Congress set ambitious targets for First Five Year Plan • Right Opposition (Tomsky, Rykov and Bukharin) removed from Politburo • Trotsky expelled from the USSR • Collectivisation introduced; the 'liquidation of the kulaks'

Stalin and the Historians

Historians see Stalin's rise to power and the relationship between Stalinism and Leninism in a variety of different ways. Some argue that Stalin's rule represented a major deviation from that of Lenin, whilst others see a basic continuity in their methods. Some of the key interpretations are summarised below.

<p>Structuralist approach (e.g. Richard Pipes)</p>	<p>Regard Stalin as a product of Russia's circumstances. A strong ruler was required because the country was just emerging from nearly a decade of war and civil war.</p> <p>Stalin was the natural successor to Lenin because of the way the Party had become increasingly bureaucratised.</p>
<p>Continuity between Leninism and Stalinism (e.g. Robert Conquest)</p>	<p>Lenin created the single party dictatorship and system of terror, which Stalin continued. So Stalin was the heir to the Leninist tradition.</p>
<p>Stalinism viewed as a deviation from Leninism (e.g. Stephen Cohen)</p>	<p>Stalin distorted Lenin's legacy. Lenin used terror during the Civil War only as a temporary, emergency measure; Lenin allowed dissent within the Party; Lenin was hostile to a cult of the leader. Stalin, by contrast, used terror as a normal feature of government when the USSR was at peace; he suppressed debate within the Party; he created a personality cult of monstrous proportions.</p> <p>Historians like Cohen argue that Communism could have developed in a very different, less brutal way if another leader, such as Bukharin, had succeeded Lenin.</p>

Stalin's Economic Policies: 'The Revolution From Above'

Historians often use the phrase 'the Revolution from above' to characterise Stalin's economic policies in the 1930s. They argue that the economic changes brought about by Stalin and imposed on the Russian people represented much more of a transformation of society than the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in 1917. Stalin abandoned Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) and introduced rapid industrialisation in the guise of his Five Year Plans (1928 onwards) and forced collectivisation (from 1929).

Q. Why did Stalin end NEP and instead introduce Collectivisation and the Five Year Plans?

- NEP had enabled the economy to recover, by 1926, from the effects of the First World War and Civil War, but economic growth slowed down thereafter.
- Lenin had presented NEP as a temporary retreat from socialism. By the late 1920s, many Communists were impatient to get on and build a modern, socialist economy; they wanted to pursue a more heroic vision than the tired compromise with capitalism that NEP represented.