

The Politburo, the struggle to succeed Lenin, Key Historical perspective

By the time of Lenin's death in January 1924, Soviet Russia had been, in practice, a one-party state for almost three years.

It is important to realise that Stalin's rise to power was unexpected and his struggle to succeed Lenin did not start from a result of Lenin's death but rather in 1922 when Lenin's strokes were becoming more and more severe, however in the early 1920s very few would have predicted his eventual rise to power. Stalin took over an already established authoritarian state.

It is important to preface before that Stalin was not an articulate speech maker, nor was he particularly worldly and he was not considered an intellectual. He was a Bolshevik and a member of the political party that helped carry out the October Revolution. Stalin, however, is associated with the consolidation of the Soviet Union and it was his policies that became the model for all communist states in the 20th century.

Stalin's rise to power in the 1920s can be divided into three stages:

early moves against Leon Trotsky, the defeat of the left, and the defeat of the right

Just to give a brief introduction before his ascent to power, he was born in 1878 in Georgia which is a former soviet republic and Russian was Stalin's second language. He became very inspired by a revolutionary socialist group called Messame Dassy which wanted Georgia to gain independence from Russia and this was his introduction to the marxism ideology however he was expelled in 1899 and in 1901 he joined Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and became a revolutionary.

Stalin became involved in organizing strikes among factory workers. He was arrested for this by the Okhrana in 1902, and he was sent into exile in Siberia, although he escaped in 1904. He was later exiled for life in 1913 and remained in Siberia till 1917 when the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty led to the establishment of the Provisional Government and the released all the political prisoners.

Upon his return to Russia, he joined the editorial board of Pravda and he was also elected to the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party and later was appointed commissar for nationalities. However Lenin accused Stalin of being a 'betrayal of socialism' because of his support for the provisional government therefore he devoted his time towards the inevitable revolution.

How was Stalin able to secure the Leadership of the communist Party?

1. Stalin was a member of the Politburo and Orgburo, the top committees within the communist Party and he held several powerful positions within the Party apparatus.

Politburo:

Short for Political Bureau, this was the Communist Party's body responsible for making political decisions.

Important members of the body in addition to Lenin composed of ...

Grigory Zinoviev

A Bolshevik since 1903 and a close comrade of Lenin. He was the leader of the Leningrad (Petrograd) city and regional government as his role in the Politburo. He was appointed the first chairman of Comintern in 1919.

Lev Kamenev

A Bolshevik since 1903 and a close confidant of Lenin. He was the chairman of the Moscow Party.

Leon Trotsky

A Bolshevik only since 1917, he was a brilliant orator and strategist. Planned the revolution in October 1917 and led the Red Army to victory in the civil war. Commissar for foreign affairs and then appointed commissar for military and naval affairs.

Nikolai Bukharin

A Bolshevik since 1906, he was the editor of Pravda. In addition to the Politburo he was also on the committee of Comintern.

Mikhail Tomsky

A trade union leader who joined the Bolsheviks in 1906. A moderate who favoured the NEP, he was elected to the Politburo in 1927.

Lenin appointed Stalin as General Secretary in 1922. He was able to use this to develop a foundation of power within the Party, as he could promote and dismiss influential Party officials, particularly local Party secretaries.

The key to power came from the Party organisation, rather than the state institutions which means that the party was quickly gaining full power and its sphere of influence was increasing. As its membership expanded, its control became centralised with a lot of power in Stalin's hands. Trotsky was Stalin's greatest opposition and rival however Trotsky held no significant position within the workings of Party and he was not able to compete with Stalin

(The Party grew rapidly, numbering 800,000 members by 1925 and over 1.5 million by 1929.)

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 named, and concentrated their efforts on preventing Trotsky from gaining control over the Party as a result, his rise to power was very convoluted as no one expected it. As a result, Trotsky was falsely deemed by many to be the probable successor to Lenin.

Stalin was a very skilful political operator and was able to play off different factions within the Party leadership against each other. Stalin often followed the majority side within the Politburo on policies he was not passionate about, as this would avoid making unnecessary enemies and in this way he was very good at creating a facade in order to gain popular support.

He did this because of person rivalries he had, as Kamenev and Zinoviev resented Trotsky and so did Stalin so the three of them worked together against Trotsky in 1922 to 1925, thus forming the Triumvirate or Troika with the common goal of forcing Trotsky to resign. By 1926, Zinoviev and Kamenev worked against Stalin by working with Trotsky on the United Opposition.

This is where we see the first signs of bureaucracy...

After October 1922, Lenin became more concerned about the political and personal tensions among leading communists. He proposed to Trotsky that they should form a 'Joint Bloc for Democracy' against growing signs of bureaucracy in the party and the state.

Before Lenin died it was clear to him that there would almost certainly be a struggle for power after he was gone. For this reason he wrote his Testament, in which he gave short portraits of his most probable successors, and their faults. He recognized five possible candidates: Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and Josef Stalin. Of these, it was Stalin who climbed to the top and became the main leader by 1929. Lenin had warned that although Stalin had great practical abilities, these were offset by his roughness and lack of consideration for his colleagues. Stalin, Lenin said, was 'too rude' and should be removed from his post as General Secretary of the Communist Party. Not only did Stalin manage to keep this quiet, he also managed to outmanoeuvre the other likely candidates for leader, this introduced the power struggle in succeeding Lenin.

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 had recommended Stalin's dismissal as General Secretary. This is a very important factor that allowed Stalin to keep his influence and power, which is quite odd and puts into perspective Stalin's luck.

Additionally, Stalin was able to outmanoeuvre Trotsky by appearing as the chief mourner at Lenin's funeral and then by promoting himself as the true heir of Lenin. It's quite interesting because Stalin actually lied to Trotsky about the date of the funeral for his own personal benefit, making Trotsky look bad. Stalin was vicious.

There were also major policy disagreements within the Party.

The Party was split over whether to abolish NEP or not. 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 (Bukharin) under which the peasants argued that NEP was working and should be maintained. The Left also favoured

'Permanent Revolution' as essential to the survival of socialism in Russia. In 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 therefore the Russian Communist Party must focus on establishing a socialist economy at home.

Where did Stalin fit among these two factions?

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 1929-1930, the Right (Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomsky) were removed from the Politburo and replaced by supporters of Stalin. So Stalin's ideological standing was very fluid and always subject to change based on which ever favoured his rise to power, being very opportunist and pragmatic.

1. Stage 1: Early moves against Leon Trotsky

Lenin was more or less incapable of directing the Politburo due to the severity of his strokes and Stalin became alert for opportunities to assert his influence. Stalin was aware of how much was at stake and was able to take advantage of the power vacuum far more effectively than any of his rivals. For example, although Trotsky was expected to give the speech (the oration) at Lenin's funeral, this very important role was given to Stalin. Because as I mentioned Trotsky was absent and according to historian Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky claimed that '...he failed to return for the funeral in Moscow because Stalin had misinformed him about the date' which creates the formation of the left opposition through Stalin's isolationist tactics in order to push himself forward.

In 1921 Lenin introduced a faction ban within the Communist Party and a ban on opposition parties in the soviets which without a doubt played a crucial role in Stalin's rise to power.

However, in a way, Stalin was creating a faction through his triumvirate. The triumvirate campaign against Trotsky began in April 1923 at the 12th Congress. With Lenin absent because of his poor health, the Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev isolated Trotsky. The Congress re-elected

Stalin as general secretary and elected a new enlarged Central Committee – of the 40 members, only three were strong supporters of Trotsky. As general secretary, Stalin began to replace Trotsky's supporters with supporters of the triumvirate, especially those who were loyal to him.

Stalin was very cruel.

Essentially, the Politburo allowed a platform in which Stalin was able to manipulate the divisions that were already established within the body for his own personal gain, however one would argue that what Russia needed at the time was a unification of leadership within the Politburo in order for progress to occur.

2. Stage 2: The defeat of the Left Opposition, 1924–27

In July 1926, Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev formed the United Opposition, this being opposition from the Left. However, Stalin's control of the party enabled him to ban their meetings and dismiss their supporters. He then accused them of breaking the 1921 ban on factions despite breaking the ban himself and persuaded the Central Committee to remove Zinoviev and Kamenev from the Politburo. Only Trotsky now remained there to oppose him. Later on, one of Trotsky's supporters will publish Lenin's Testament in the New York Times, leading Stalin to expel Trotsky from the Politburo. Stalin makes it clear that his use of isolation is what is allowing him to abolish all opposition rather than violence SO FAR.

However it is important to note that In June 1927, Stalin tried to have Trotsky and Zinoviev expelled from the Central Committee for the first time yet he failed and this jeopardized his position and the security of his power Stalin's actions shocked Zinoviev and Kamenev. By 10 December 1927 the United Opposition was over. In January 1928, Trotsky was forcibly deported to Alma-Ata, near the Chinese border. Other oppositionists were deported elsewhere; many were moved to minor posts in other remote places in the USSR, to prevent them from communicating with one another.

3. Stage 3: Defeat of The Right

Despite the fact that Stalin was either in support of the right or left wing movement, in the end he abolished both.

The final stage of the power struggle began almost immediately after the United Opposition had been defeated. By 1927, bread shortages and high food prices led Stalin to adopt a new 'left' course for industry and agriculture which highlights how Stalin understood the needs in order to maintain the influx of supporters for his rise to power. This produced a rift between the divisions in the Politburo over the continuation of NEP. Many oppositions to Stalin were removed from positions of power, thus strengthening Stalin's position.

During July, the food crisis became worse (see page 45). Temporarily, it seemed the Right faction was gaining the upper hand when Bukharin won a vote in the Central Committee to slow Stalin's left approach. Bukharin persuaded Kamenev to contact Trotsky, saying he feared Stalin would 'strangle us'. Bukharin argued that Stalin was preparing to create a police state and take total power. In September 1928, Trotsky and Bukharin considered an alliance to restore party and soviet democracy, but their respective supporters were reluctant. The right, who felt the New Economic Policy should be continued, were generally opposed to the left, who wished to end the NEP. On the other hand, the left objected to an alliance with the right at a time when Stalin seemed about to implement some of their own economic policies. Instead, they now preferred an alliance with Stalin and the centre rather than with the right. Trotsky's willingness to consider such an alliance lost him some supporters amongst the left, thus making it easier for Stalin to isolate him. The Right surrendered to Stalin, while the left remained divided. Thus Stalin had managed to defeat both factions by relying solely on his own supporters. However, Stalin now decided to make the Politburo expel Trotsky from Soviet Russia.

Why did Stalin emerge as leader of the Soviet Union? KEY HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Historians differ in their opinions about the reasons for Stalin's emergence and rise to power, as no one factor seems to offer a satisfactory explanation. In fact, the main historical interpretations often overlap in several respects.

Power politics

According to this view, Stalin's rise can be seen as resulting from his deliberate and skilful manipulation of genuine political and ideological differences amongst the Bolshevik leaders. Robert Conquest, for example, argues that Stalin's aim was simply to gain supreme power by crushing all other factions whereas Tucker argues that Stalin's aim was to make himself into a revolutionary hero as important and famous as Lenin. Stalin's success is seen as dependent not only on his political shrewdness and ruthlessness, but also on the weaknesses and mistakes of his rivals.

Zinoviev and Kamenev have been portrayed as, respectively, careerist and weak willed according to Edward Carr. However Bukharin's commitment to the NEP is seen as having blinded him to the dangers posed by Stalin until it was too late from Stephen Cohen's perspective,

Perhaps more importantly, Lenin himself did not realise the threat from Stalin until 1922, just two years before his death. For most of those two years, Lenin was too ill to be politically active. Stalin's main opponent, Trotsky, can be seen as having made several serious errors and miscalculations – perhaps because he dismissed Stalin as a 'grey blur' and a 'mediocrity'.

However, it has been argued that without Lenin he was virtually isolated at the top of the party from the beginning, therefore he was destined for this outcome (Isaac Deutscher).

Structuralist explanations

While there are several different structuralist explanations, they have one theme in common: that Stalin was a product of Russian history and the administrative system set up after 1917.

Some historians see Stalin as essentially a ruler in the long tsarist tradition of absolutist rule – the 'Red Tsar'.

Others point to the impact of the civil war, which led to the development of appointment rather than election for party and state positions. As the administrative apparatus grew, so did Stalin's power to appoint at both national and local level. As a result, bureaucracy increased, enabling Stalin to control party congresses, the Central Committee and the Politburo itself.

Robert Daniels calls this a 'circular flow of power', by which Stalin appointed local party leaders, who in turn controlled elections to party organisations.

Socio-cultural explanations

Socio-cultural explanations of Stalin's rise to power are closely linked to structural explanations. They emphasise the impact of the social structure on the politics and development of the Communist Party and the Soviet state.

During the civil war, for example, the Bolsheviks attracted Russian patriots who resented the foreign intervention used by the Whites according to Sheila Fitzpatrick.

Then, when it looked as if the Reds (Bolsheviks) were winning, a large number of careerists joined the winning side. This situation worsened after 1921, when all opposition parties were banned through the faction ban. In addition, many new party members (often ex-peasants) had no real understanding of Marxism or recent Bolshevik history. All these groups were easily manipulated by the party leadership.

Ideological explanations

Several historians stress the genuine political differences among the communist leaders of the 1920s, especially over the NEP. In particular, E. H. Carr, Alexander Erlich and Moshe Lewin have treated the ideological positions as more important than mere facades of Stalin in order to gain profit for his own desire. The left feared the NEP might eventually lead to the restoration of capitalism, whereas the right argued that, as the Soviet Union was overwhelmingly agricultural and backward, while industry was in crisis the NEP was essential if the economy was to revive. Thus Stalin's rise can be seen as a genuine political response by the centre to steer a midway policy course by adapting to what he needed in order to rise to power. But, later, the centre

came to see that a change was needed – it became necessary to attack the policies of the right, who wished the NEP to continue.

And as a result of this Stalin's policies can thus be seen as consistent and in tune with the bulk of the party membership, who desired stability above all. Stalin's policy of continuing the NEP and 'socialism in one country' (see page 25) seemed safer than the idea of Trotsky's 'permanent revolution', and it also appealed to national pride. Stalin's dramatic change of course in the years 1927–28 can be seen as a response to a real crisis which is why he gained the support he did.

One interpretation of Stalin's rise, which combines elements of the socio-cultural explanation, is one developed by Trotsky himself. Pointing to the failure of international revolution and the consequent isolation of the new Soviet state, Trotsky argued that early soviet democracy was undermined by Russian backwardness and the disinterest of the proletariat. This allowed conservative and reactionary elements as a method of coping which Trotsky refers to as 'bureaucratic degeneration'.

Thus according to Trotsky, Stalin's victory was the result of unforeseen historical and cultural developments after 1917 rather than the mistakes of his opponents.