

Stalin's Rise to Power, 1924–29

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The Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia (1924–2000)

Introduction

Any study of the consolidation of the Soviet state from 1924 onwards involves a study of the policies and methods Stalin used to ensure its survival, development and expansion during his long leadership. Before examining these, however, it is necessary to understand how he rose to power, as many of the issues involved in the power struggle which broke out after 1924 formed the background to his later policies. This chapter, after providing some background on events 1917–24, will examine Stalin's rise, and the reasons why he was able to become the dominant leader of the Soviet Union – a position he held from 1928 until his death in 1953.

TIMELINE

- 1917 Oct/Nov:** Bolshevik Revolution
- 1921 Mar:** Kronstadt Rebellion; NEP adopted, factions and opposition parties banned
- 1922 Apr:** Stalin becomes General-Secretary of the Communist Party
- Dec:** Lenin writes his last Testament; Triumvirate formed against Trotsky
- 1923 Jan:** Lenin's Postscript recommends Stalin's dismissal
- 1924 Jan:** Lenin dies; 13th Party Conference condemns Trotsky's views
- May:** Central Committee keeps Lenin's Testament secret and decides not to dismiss Stalin
- 1925 Apr:** Party debate over 'permanent revolution' versus 'socialism in one country'
- May:** Start of the Leningrad Opposition
- Dec:** 14th Party Congress; the Leningrad Opposition is outvoted
- 1926 Jul:** United Opposition formed; Zinoviev dismissed from the Politburo
- 1927 Oct:** Stalin persuades the Central Committee to expel Trotsky and Zinoviev from the Central Committee
- Nov:** Trotsky and Zinoviev expelled from the Communist Party, and Kamenev from the Central Committee
- Dec:** 15th Party Congress: Zinoviev and Kamenev end the United Opposition
- 1928 Jul:** Stalin and Bukharin clash over collectivisation

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Aug: Bukharin tries to form an alliance with Trotsky

1929 Apr: Bukharin removed as editor of *Pravda*

Nov: Bukharin removed from Politburo

Note: The Russian calendar in use until 1918 was 13 days behind the calendar used in the rest of Europe. The revolutions of 1917 took place in February and October according to the old Russian calendar, but in March and November according to the Western calendar. This book therefore refers to the February/March Revolution and the October/November Revolution.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What was Stalin's position before 1924?
- How did Stalin win the struggle for power after 1924?
- Why was Stalin able to defeat his rivals?

Overview

- In November 1917, Lenin's Bolsheviks took power in a revolution which had the backing of large numbers of industrial workers and soldiers. After the revolution, the Bolsheviks (renamed the Russian Communist Party in 1918) formed a new revolutionary government.
- However, they faced violent opposition, and a civil war broke out which lasted until 1921. During this period, the constant turmoil led to serious political crises and economic collapse. These problems sparked growing disagreements among the Russian Communist Party (RCP) leaders about what policies to adopt after 1921.
- From 1922, Lenin had suffered a series of progressively serious strokes, which increasingly prevented him from taking an active part in politics. In December 1922, he wrote a Testament, outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the main leaders; in January 1923, worried by some of Stalin's actions, he added a Postscript, recommending Stalin be dismissed.

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- Trotsky's main rivals, Zinoviev and Kamenev, made an alliance with Stalin, in order to prevent Trotsky replacing Lenin. Using his position as general-secretary, Stalin was able to control meetings and elections to conferences and congresses. Trotsky was soon isolated.
- With Trotsky defeated, Stalin then turned on Zinoviev and Kamenev, supported by Bukharin and the Right. Later, in 1928, having defeated the Left, Stalin turned on Bukharin and by 1929 had also defeated the Right of the Party.



Figure 2.1: Lenin (circled left) and Trotsky (circled right) with Red Army troops after the suppression of the Kronstadt Rebellion in 1921.

2.1 What was Stalin's position before 1924?

In early 1924, **Josef Stalin** seemed most unlikely to rise to the top. Yet, by 1929, he had politically defeated and neutralised all his main rivals – all of whom had seemed much more likely candidates for the leadership after Lenin's death.

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Josef Stalin (1880–1953):

His real name was Josef Djughashvili; he joined the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and sided with Lenin in the 1903 split. Unlike most of the other communist leaders, he was not an intellectual, and mainly undertook practical tasks (including bank robberies and editing newspapers). In 1922, he took on the role of General-Secretary of the Communist Party – a routine administrative job which the other leaders did not want. He rarely disagreed with Lenin and, after the latter's death in 1924, began to use his position to make himself supreme ruler. He executed many of his rivals in the purges of the 1930s, and remained head of the USSR until his death in 1953.

Lenin's 'Last Struggle', 1921–24

During the final stages of the First World War, in February/March 1917, a revolution in Russia had overthrown the Tsar (emperor), and an unelected provisional government had declared Russia to be a democratic republic.

However, the Provisional Government failed to carry out land reform, kept Russia in the war, and delayed holding promised elections. Consequently, it became increasingly unpopular. In October/November, a second revolution had taken place, at the insistence of Lenin. This Bolshevik Revolution made Russia the world's first workers' state.

This new state – renamed the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (RSFSR) – was then plunged into three years of civil war.

Though the Bolsheviks finally won power in 1921, the massive economic and political problems all this turmoil and warfare had created led to many sharp policy differences between the leading Bolsheviks.

A one-party state?

The most important disagreement was over economic policy. At the start of the Civil War, an economic policy known as 'war communism' had been adopted as an emergency measure. Grain had been requisitioned from the peasants to ensure adequate supplies for the Soviets' Red Army and the industrial centres; all private trade had been banned; and all factories, mines and banks were nationalised (taken over by the government). However, this policy – along with the damage

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suffered as a consequence of the Civil War, and the restrictions on democracy during the war – had led to the Kronstadt Rising in March 1921, in which workers, sailors and soldiers had staged a serious revolt in protest.

Though this revolt had been ruthlessly crushed, Lenin persuaded the 10th Party Congress of 1921 to adopt a New Economic Policy (NEP) to replace War Communism – this introduced a partial step-back towards small-scale capitalism. This limited revival of capitalism, and the shock of the Kronstadt Rising, also led Lenin to introduce a ban on factions within the Communist Party – and a ban on opposition parties in the Soviets. Several communists opposed this ban, and later Lenin stated that it was a purely temporary measure, intended to cope with the acute political and economic crisis.

KEY CONCEPTS ACTIVITY

Significance: Find out more about War Communism, the Kronstadt Rising, and the NEP. Then explain why these policies and events, and the ban on factions and other parties, were so important for later political developments in the Soviet Union.

Stalin versus Trotsky

In May 1922, Lenin had the first of a series of strokes, which increasingly restricted his ability to take an active part in politics. Yet there were significant political differences over internal political democracy and what attitude to take about furthering world revolution. Leading communists began to consider what would happen if Lenin died. The most important communists after Lenin were the other members of the Politburo. The Politburo (short for ‘Political Bureau’) was the RCP’s body responsible for making political decisions between Congresses. Though, in theory, the Politburo was responsible to the Central Committee (CC) which elected it, and to the Party Congress (which elected the CC), in practice, the Politburo soon came to dominate the other two bodies. In 1921, it comprised: Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov, Stalin and Tomsy. Of these, **Leon Trotsky** seemed the most likely to replace Lenin. After him, Zinoviev and Kamenev were strong political leaders (of the Petrograd and Moscow Communist Party branches, respectively) and had long been associated with Lenin – their weak spot was that they had been opposed to the

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November Revolution at first. Bukharin, too, was a well-known and popular revolutionary leader. Stalin was not well known and seemed unlikely to emerge as a major leader. However, he had been appointed Commissar (minister) for the nationalities after the revolution and, in April 1922, had been appointed General-Secretary of the Communist Party; this position included appointing and dismissing communist officials.

Leon Trotsky (1879–1940):

His real name was Leon Bronstein. He had been a member of the RSDLP, but had opposed Lenin's ideas on party organisation. In August 1917, he joined the Bolsheviks, as both he and Lenin had now developed very similar outlooks. He was defeated by Stalin and his supporters, and expelled from the Soviet Union in 1929. In 1938, he set up the Trotskyist Fourth International, as he had become convinced by then that the Communist International (see 2.2, The campaign against 'Trotskyism') and its parties had become so 'Stalinist' and conservative that they were unreformable. He was assassinated in Mexico in 1940 by one of Stalin's agents.

QUESTION

What important position did Stalin take on in 1922? How did this help him become the ruler of the USSR?

Many of the leading communists resented Trotsky's rapid rise to the top of the party after August 1917. Zinoviev and Kamenev in particular believed they should take over from Lenin, and turned to Stalin for help to stop Trotsky succeeding – these three became known as the 'triumvirs' (a reference to Ancient Rome when, for a time, it was ruled by a government of three officials). As early as December 1922, they began moves to prevent Trotsky obtaining majority support. Though Lenin's strokes kept him from active involvement in politics, his awareness of these political and personal tensions caused him growing concern, and led him to propose to Trotsky that they should form a Joint Bloc for Democracy against growing signs of bureaucracy in the party and the state.

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The Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia (1924–2000)**Lenin's Testament**

Towards the end of December 1922, Lenin suffered a second stroke. Concerned about what might happen after his death, he dictated his initial thoughts for what he thought would be his last Testament, outlining the strengths and weaknesses of all the leading communists. He was particularly worried by Stalin's attitudes towards the non-Russian nationalities. After 1921, Lenin had come to favour a looser federation of autonomous states rather than a more centralised unitary state which Stalin was trying to push through.

Lenin was particularly concerned about Stalin's use of force against those in the Soviet republic of Georgia who were against his plans.

These concerns led Lenin to add a Postscript to his Testament in January 1923, recommending Stalin's removal from all his posts.

SOURCE 2.1

Files on the Georgian Affair were brought out for Lenin to examine. He had made his mind up about the verdict: Stalin and his associates were guilty of Great Russian chauvinism even though Stalin, Ordzhonikidze and Dzierzynski themselves were not Russians. Already at the end of the previous year, in an article on the national question, Lenin had acknowledged:

'I am, it seems, immensely guilty before the workers of Russia for not intervening sufficiently energetically and sufficiently sharply in the notorious question of autonomisation, officially known, it seems as the question of the union of soviet socialist republics.'

He also dictated an article on bureaucracy in the organs of party and government, making strong criticisms of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate. It was obvious to informed observers that Stalin, who headed the Inspectorate, was his principal target... telling his secretaries to keep everything to themselves and to lock up his papers. This was how he plotted the downfall of an individual whom he considered the greatest danger to the Revolution...

Service, R., 2005, Stalin: a Biography, London, Pan, p. 210.

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SOURCE 2.2

Since he became General Secretary, Comrade Stalin has concentrated in his hands immeasurable power, and I am not sure that he will always know how to use that power with sufficient caution. On the other hand Comrade Trotsky... is distinguished not only by his outstanding qualities (personally he is the most capable man in the present Central Committee) but also by his excess of self-confidence and a readiness to be carried away by the purely administrative side of affairs....

Stalin is too rude, and this fault, entirely supportable in relations amongst us Communists, becomes insupportable in the office of General Secretary. Therefore, I propose to the comrades to find a way of removing Stalin from that position and to appoint another man who in all respects differs from Stalin only in superiority; namely, more patient, more loyal, more polite, less capricious, and more attentive to comrades.

Extracts from Lenin's Testament and Postscript, 25 December 1922 and 4 January 1923. Quoted in Lynch, M., 1990, Stalin and Khrushchev: The USSR 1924–64, London, Hodder & Stoughton, pp. 15–16.

From then, until his death the following year, Lenin urged Trotsky on several occasions to launch a campaign against bureaucracy, and for the restoration of party and Soviet democracy.

QUESTION

Why did Lenin write a *Postscript* to his *Testament* in January 1923?

By January 1923, the triumvirs' alliance had been finalised. Soon a 'whispering campaign' was underway, concerning Trotsky's non-Bolshevik past, and his earlier disagreements with Lenin. However, Stalin appeared to be in serious trouble in March 1923 – his rudeness to Lenin's wife, **Nadezhda Krupskaya**, had led Lenin to send him a harsh letter, on 5 March, threatening to 'break relations' with him if he did not retract and apologise. Kamenev was aware of this, and of Lenin's intention to politically 'crush' Stalin: at this stage, it seemed that Stalin's ambitions were doomed to failure. But then Lenin suffered a third stroke, which left him paralysed and speechless for most of the time until his death in January 1924.

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Nadezhda Krupskaya (1869–1939):

Often known as ‘Nadya’, she was a revolutionary and writer, and had married Lenin in 1898. She initially supported Stalin against Trotsky, but later, for a time, supported Zinoviev and Kamenev when they began to criticise Stalin. She was involved in education, acting as a deputy Commissar (minister) for Education in 1918 under Lenin, and again from 1929 to 1939. She also played a big role in establishing Komsomol (the Young Communist organisation).



Figure 2.2: According to Boris Bazhanov (1900–83), Stalin’s personal secretary from 1923 to 1925, Stalin was ‘jubilant’ over Lenin’s death, though in public he put on a show of grief.

Most historians (such as Robert Service) accept the authenticity of Lenin’s Testament and Postscript, and his letter of 5 March about Stalin’s use of foul language against Krupskaya. However, these aspects are questioned by Hiroaki Kuromiya, who states, in his 2005 biography on Stalin, that all of these events have been the subject of recent scrutiny. In particular, he argues that there are ‘too many documentary and evidential inconsistencies’.