

STALIN AND THE USSR, 1924–41

After Lenin's death in 1924 there was a struggle for power in Russia. By 1928 Stalin had emerged as leader and had begun a dramatic economic transformation of the USSR.

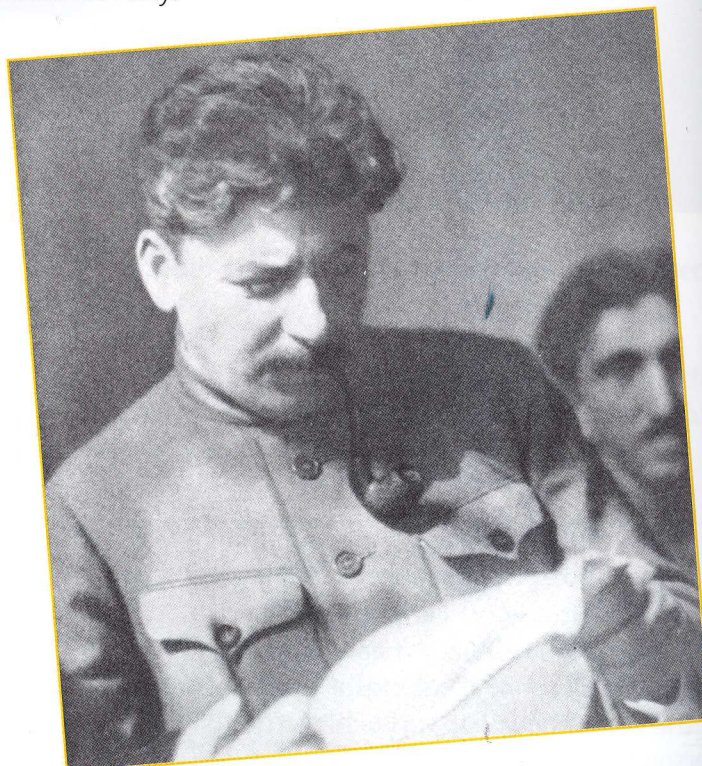
Stalin's rise to power

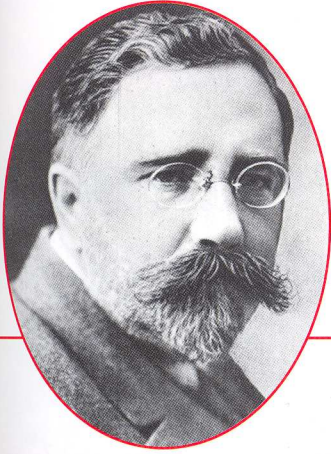
There were five possible candidates, all members of the Politburo, to succeed Lenin: Stalin, Trotsky, Grigori Zinoviev, Leon Kamenev and Nicolai Bukharin.

Focus on

Stalin's early life and career

Stalin was born in 1879, the son of a Georgian bootmaker. His real name was Joseph Djugashvili. His mother was determined that he would do well and worked hard to pay for his education. He worked well at school but was expelled from college in 1899 for failing to take his exams. He had become interested in the ideas of Karl Marx and wanted to work for a revolution. He became a member of the Bolshevik Party. In the period 1905–8 he took part in over 1000 raids to seize money for the Party. Stalin spent much of the period 1905–17 either in exile in Siberia or on the run from the authorities in Russia. He was freed from exile in 1917 and returned to Petrograd to become editor of the Bolshevik newspaper, *Pravda*. He was not as well known as Trotsky and Lenin and played little part in the November Revolution. In Lenin's government he was made Commissar of Nationalities and crushed a rebellion in his own state of Georgia using great brutality. In 1922 he became General Secretary of the Communist Party.





Profile on

Kamenev

He was an able and modest man and a close associate of Lenin. Like Stalin, he was from Georgia and, like Trotsky, he was Jewish. He greatly angered Lenin in 1917 by opposing the November Revolution. After the Revolution he was made Communist Party boss in Moscow.



Profile on

Zinoviev

He was a founder member of the Bolshevik Party and had worked closely with Lenin between 1903 and 1917. He was a very effective public speaker, but was vain and lacked understanding of the economy. He also was Jewish and opposed the November Revolution. After the Revolution he became Communist Party boss in Petrograd and was head of the Comintern, the organisation through which Soviet Russia tried to bring about Communist revolutions in other countries.



Profile on

Bukharin

Like Lenin he was born into a middle-class family. His parents were Moscow schoolteachers. He first made a name for himself as a left-wing Bolshevik who strongly opposed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. He then became a moderate and one of the strongest supporters of NEP.

Stalin seemed to have little chance of success. Lenin had warned against Stalin in his *Testament* written in 1923.

SOURCE A

Lenin's views on Stalin in his *Testament*

Comrade Stalin, having become Secretary, has unlimited authority concentrated in his hands and I am not sure whether he will be capable of using that authority with sufficient caution. Comrade Trotsky, on the other hand, is perhaps the most capable man in the present Committee. Stalin is too rude and this fault is not acceptable in the office of Secretary. Therefore I propose to comrades that they find a way of removing Stalin from his post.

Trotsky had several advantages over Stalin:

- He was Lenin's own choice as successor.
- He had a strong personality and was intelligent.
- He was popular with the army.
- He had played a leading part in the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War.

It was Stalin, however, who was successful.

Why did Stalin succeed?

Stalin had several advantages over Trotsky:

- Trotsky was not popular with the Politburo and the old Bolsheviks because he had not joined the party until 1917, having been a Menshevik. Kamenev and Zinoviev disliked Trotsky and disagreed with his political ideas. He also failed to use his popularity in the army to help his cause.
- Trotsky and the other contenders underestimated Stalin because he appeared dull and hardworking.
- As General Secretary Stalin held the key post in the Party. He appointed officials who supported him and built up a power base. He soon commanded the support of most Party officials who owed their position to him.
- Stalin successfully presented himself as Lenin's close follower. For example, he tricked Trotsky so that he did not attend Lenin's funeral. Stalin appeared as the chief mourner. Stalin also used propaganda to show how close he was to Lenin and to criticise Trotsky.
- Stalin also used clever tactics. He played off one group in the Party, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Trotsky against Bukharin in the Politburo.
- Finally, Stalin's ideas for the future proved more popular with the Party. He promoted 'Socialism in One Country'. He felt that the Soviet Union should concentrate on establishing Communism at home, making itself a modern country. Trotsky, on the other hand, believed in 'permanent, or world, revolution'. He felt that Communism would not survive unless the Communist revolution spread to other countries. He believed it was the duty of the USSR to help revolutionary groups in other countries. This did not appeal to many Russians who had experienced four years of war followed by three years of civil war.

SOURCE B

From Ronald Seth, *Leon Trotsky, the Eternal Rebel*, 1967

Trotsky was recovering from an illness when Lenin died. He telephoned Stalin to ask when the funeral was to be. Stalin said: 'On Saturday, you can't get back in time anyway so we advise you to continue with your treatment'. This was a lie, the funeral was not to be until Sunday and Trotsky could have reached Moscow by then.

SOURCE C

A photograph published after Lenin's death in 1924. It shows Stalin (on the right) as the chief mourner at his funeral.



Activity

A curriculum vitae, or CV, is an outline of a person's qualifications for a job. Trotsky and Stalin are applying for the job of leader as successor to Lenin in 1924. Draw up a CV for each candidate.

- 1924 Stalin first had to deal with Lenin's *Testament*. He was saved when the Central Committee decided to keep the letter secret because it might have caused disunity. Kamenev and Zinoviev defended Stalin. They wanted his help in stopping Trotsky from becoming leader.
- 1925 Stalin ensured that his ideas on 'Socialism in One Country' were popular in the Party. Kamenev and Zinoviev worked with Stalin in the Politburo to dismiss Trotsky as Commissar of War.
- 1926-27 With three of his allies elected to the Politburo, Stalin had Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev dismissed from the Politburo. Trotsky and Zinoviev were then expelled from the Party.
- 1929 In the Politburo Stalin now argued against NEP and in favour of expanding industry. When the Right opposed this, Stalin used his majority to vote them down. In 1929 Bukharin was forced to resign.

Questions

- 1 What does Source A tell you about Lenin's opinion of Stalin?
- 2 What do Sources B and C reveal about Stalin's methods of achieving success in the leadership contest?
- 3 Did Stalin succeed in becoming leader only because of the weakness of Trotsky?