

Why did Stalin emerge as Leader of the Soviet Union?

Christian Kliesch
Central and East European Studies
University of Glasgow

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The emergence of Stalin as the new leader of the USSR meant an end to collective rule in the USSR. Although Lenin was very influential within the party and can be considered its leader, but within the close circle of the politburo it there was still room for argument, and almost all members disagreed with Lenin over one point or another. This dramatically changed after Lenin's death, when Stalin step by step removed his opponents and became became the sole leader of the USSR (Daniels 1953). However, he was not Lenin's natural successor. In fact, compared to his competitors, Stalin had a faint personality. According to his secretary, Bazhanov, Stalin was a nonentity in the communist leadership (Urban 1982, p.9). This view was shared by many of his contemporaries. He was perceived as the "great blur" (Trotsky). He was neither a great speaker nor an intellectual (Urban 1982). This raises the question how he was able to emerge victorious in the power struggle that began even before Lenin's death (Fitzpatrick 1982, p.81).

In his testament Lenin criticised virtually every person that would be capable of succeeding him, but it was Stalin whom he was most critical of. In fact, he even urged for his removal from his position as General Secretary, as he might misuse his power (McNeal 1959). This goes back to incidents in 1922, when Stalin used his power against the Georgians, and their relationship suffered further on the issue of the USSR's neighbouring communist nations. Stalin suggested their incorporation into the RSFSR which Lenin considered to be imperialist. Although the actual difference to what Lenin had in mind was only marginal (Service 2003, p.129), the issue boiled up and evolved into a serious split between the two. However, the whole matter became even more personal, when Stalin was rude to Lenin's wife (McNeal 1959). Therefore Stalin was worried about the impact of the

impact of the testament, which would certainly have put an end to his career if it was published. But with the support of Zinoviev and Kamenev he managed to withhold its publication outside the politburo. He was not just able to suppress Lenin's last will, but, by offering to resign over his post as General Secretary, Stalin asked for a confidence vote from the other members of the Politburo, leaving the debate strengthened (Daniels 1953). By his fellow members of the politburo, Stalin was initially not perceived as dangerous. Although Lenin had warned of him, his main position as General Secretary was perceived as dull and essentially not useful to gain a strong political profile, earning him the nickname "comrade card index" (Roberts 2003, p. 50). But in reality, the post of General Secretary allowed Stalin a different kind of power: The control of party members. Thus he was able to put his own supporters into place and establish himself a strong base for support (Daniels 1953).

After Lenin's death it appeared that it was Trotsky who had the biggest aspirations on becoming the new leader and it was feared that he would emerge as the Russian Napoleon (Daniels 1953, p. 154). Together with Kamenev and Zinoviev, Stalin formed a 'triumvirate' in order to put pressure on Trotsky. This is not solely based on Trotsky's aspirations, but, in the case of Zinoviev, also on personal antipathies that went back to the civil war. The relationship of Stalin and Trotsky was similarly flawed, as both had diverging opinions on the matter of the party structure and policy regarding bureaucracy and expertise. Stalin hated Trotsky's use of former Tsarist officers in his division of the red army. The conflict imminent throughout their time in the politburo and made Lenin worry about them splitting the party with it (Service 2003). Trotsky, although a brilliant speaker, visionary and military leader (Service 2003, p. 104f), was less skilful in the everyday power struggle within his own party. He underestimated his colleagues and made one mistake after the other (Urban 1982): When Lenin was in his last years and after his fall-out with Stalin in 1922, Lenin and Trotsky prepared for an attack on Stalin's power, on the grounds that both wanted to increase democracy within the party and decrease the impact of bureaucracy. However, Trotsky hesitated to carry it out until autumn 1923 and his attempts were initially half hearted (Daniels 1953). Furthermore, after Lenin's death Trotsky followed Stalin's 'advice' to not attend the funeral, an important occasion, which Stalin used to deliver a momentous speech, portraying a close relationship to Lenin, that was never there (Daniels 1953). But this was only the beginning of an establishment of a cult of Lenin, that Lenin himself would probably have rejected (Tucker 1990, p. 38). The debate over the 'true' successor of Lenin became a fundamental issue within the power struggle.

Later in 1929, Trotsky attacks Zinoviev and Kamenev in his article “Lessons of October” on the grounds of their hesitation to seize power for the Bolsheviks in 1917. But his criticism did not work as intended, as it convinced the triumvirate of their need for co-operation. In December Stalin proposed his concept of “Socialism in one country” in order to launch an attack on Trotsky. He suggested that the USSR needed to focus on its own affairs and that an international revolution was not necessary for the advance of communism. This went directly against Trotsky’s idea of permanent revolution, who assumed that the spark of the revolution had to spread out to other, more industrialised countries, such as Germany, which would automatically give the USSR more security, as it would have strong natural allies. Stalin however did not agree, and he was proven right, as attempted revolutions in Hungary and Germany were not successful (Service 2003, Daniels 1953). But ‘socialism in one country’ was no position that Kamenev and Zinoviev could agree on, either. This gradually led to a split in the triumvirate and Stalin now joined forces with the rightist Bukharin. In 1925 at the Fourteenth party congress Zinoviev and Kamenev would suddenly find themselves in opposition to the official party line (Daniels 1953). Realising this, they overcame their largely personal differences with Trotsky and formed a united opposition in order to repel Stalin. As they did not achieve any success within the party, they brought the conflict out into the public. This backfired heavily, as they could now be accused of factionalism and were expelled from the party and Trotsky was even forced into exile. Although Kamenev and Zinoviev were readmitted in 1928, they did not regain sufficient strength to pose a threat to Stalin (Freeze 1997, p. 268).

The most important debate within the power struggle was about the future of the NEP. Introduced under Lenin in order to increase grain production, the policy was largely unpopular within the communist party. Due to its capitalist elements it was perceived as a step backwards (Freeze 1997) and this was worsened by its main supporter Bukharin’s slogan to the peasantry: “Enrich yourselves!” (Service 2003, p. 156) Therefore, the NEP was from its very beginning only meant to be a temporary measure. However, opinions differed on the time scale (Freeze 1997, p. 271f). The left regarded the NEP as a necessary evil that needed to be overcome better sooner than later. Trotsky urged for the introduction of central planning and industrialisation. The right, led by Bukharin saw in the NEP a long term measure. From their point of view, the country needed agrarian strength before it could start industrialisation. Initially the NEP seemed to be an economic success, industrial as well as agrarian output increased. However the catch was the difference between the two. Whilst the level of grain was sufficient to restart exports, the production of industrial products was far behind and could not

fulfil the need of the population. The lack of availability of industrial goods lead to a drastic increase in their price, making them unavailable to peasants. The so-called scissors crisis made the peasants holding back their grain which heavily undermined Bukharin's position in the ongoing power struggle. He continued to support the NEP and to overcome the difficulty of acquiring grain from the peasantry, he even suggested further concessions to them (Service 2003, p.173). Stalin himself largely refrained from the theoretical aspects of the debate but was initially allied to Bukharin. However, in 1928 he made a sudden turn, proclaiming that the NEP had to come to an end. He urged for central planning, massive collectivisation and the elimination of the kulaks (Fitzpatrick 1982). This reverse of Stalin's policy lead to the fall out with Bukharin. But Stalin was no longer dependent on his support. After the removal of Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev, Stalin was able to put supporters of himself into place (Daniels 1953). His policies, although obviously unpopular with the peasantry, gained Stalin support within the party, as many of them were in favour of a rapid state planning, industrialisation and collectivisation (Freeze 1997, p.272).

The difference between the left and the right opposition was in its organisation. As Szamuely points out, the right has learned from the defeat of the left opposition and avoided bringing the dispute into public but instead tried to keep it within the party. This lead to the obscure situation, that Bukharin had to condemn "rightist elements" when discussing with fellow communists whilst having a rightist policy on his own. However, in the end he suffered the same fate as the united opposition and was expelled from the politburo (Service 2003, p.178f). With the emergence of Kirov, a new member of the communist party emerged, that might have threatened Stalin's rule. Stalin had to share his position of General Secretary of the party with Kirov. Further evidence suggests that Kirov was at least to some extent able to undermine a further increase in power by Stalin. But Kirov was murdered in 1934. After the assassination of Kirov, for which Stalin probably cannot to be blamed, Kamenev, Zinoviev and many others were put on an excessive show trial. First sentenced to prison camp, they received the death sentence in 1936 at a retrial with new charges (Service 2003, p.214ff). Trotsky, too, was retried, although being in exile. The trial was a "farce" (Tucker 1990, p.372). The men were accused of virtually everything—allying with Trotsky, conspiracy, collaborating with fascists, the Kirov murder and a plot to kill Stalin and the only possible charge in such a trial was execution (Tucker 1990). Around the same time Stalin started extensive purges in the lower ranks of the party, too. The use of purges to clean the party was essentially nothing new and was already used under Lenin. Also, show trials were held earlier. But Stalin lead both to a new, never-seen height (Service 2003).

He purged against virtually all potential enemies. It seems that a removal of his enemies wasn't good enough. Stalin did not only profit from the removal of his long-term opponents, but due to the nature of the accusations, he was able to cause fear within future ones (Tucker 1990, p. 367ff). The 16th party congress was the first congress since the establishment of the Bolshevik party that had virtually no opposition (Szamuely 1966) and Stalin could be considered as sole ruler of the USSR. None of the former members of the Politburo survived the purges. Even Trotsky was hunted down in Mexico and killed with an ice pick (Service 2003, p. 231). This suggests, that Stalin's motives for hunting down his enemies to the ground were not due to self-protection, but revenge. As he himself writes "To choose one's victim, to prepare one's plan minutely, to slake an implacable vengeance, and then go to bed . . . There is nothing sweeter in the world." (Souvarine cited in: Urban 1982, p. 15)

Although he was faced by much stronger opponents, Stalin emerged victorious in the struggle for power that evolved after Lenin's death. At first his lack of political profile at the beginning of his career seemed to be an obstacle to his aspirations, but this 'blurriness' was in fact an advantage, as it made his opponents underestimate his actual power. He was also favoured by the structure of the communist party and due to his skilful play with its bureaucracy was able to outmanoeuvre his opponents. The ban on factionalism, introduced by Lenin, was used by Stalin to isolate them and expel them from the party. A key to his success was his position as General secretary. He himself was just promoted into the central committee in 1922 and could not count on a strong power base. He would have reversed this imbalance of power and emerge as the sole dictatorial leader of the USSR by the beginning of the 1930ies.

Stalin's behaviour in the power struggle is ambiguous. It might well be that his sudden change in policy, especially on the economic policy, was due to the social and economic developments and constraints, and his own opinion. However, it seems that Stalin operated tactically, rather than ideologically, and his moves were mainly intended to play out his competitors against each other. He placed himself in the centre of the debate, initially proposing moderate views (Daniels 1953). This tactic proved particularly useful against distinctive candidates, as it made them appear as extremists. But once he removed them and had full control of the party apparatus, he was able to pass policies that were even more extreme than those of the former leftists. They would lead to the death of millions of people through dekulakisation, industrialisation and political persecution.

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