

How stalin became the leader of the soviet history essay



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The purpose of this paper is to examine how Stalin became the sole leader of the Soviet Union while he was regarded to the Politburo as a minor player who had no chance of defeating Trotsky. Was Stalin politically strong from the beginning of this power struggle? Did Trotsky even want to become the Soviet Union's sole leader? To what extent were Stalin's opponents weak during the power struggle? Were there any external factors that led to Stalin's rise for power? Was there any luck involved in this event? These questions would be examined or answered in the investigation.

This essay focuses on the time period from 1924- the start of Soviet Russia's political power struggle- to 1929, Stalin's formal role of totalitarian dictatorship. This paper draws on a verity of primary source diary material, newspaper articles, secondary source books and periodical articles which serve as some historiography for analyzing the critical issue of how clever and cunning was Stalin in this power struggle. This has been a subject of debate over many historians since Lenin's death and the debate is examined in this paper.

This paper concludes that a combination of Stalin's political skills and his personality caused Trotsky to be eliminated during the power struggle while Stalin became the sole leader. Due to the complexity of events, we cannot determine whether this factor could be played out by itself however, most renowned historians share the same views with the factor of Stalin's political skills being the most important cause that led to his uprising.

Introduction

In 1924, a massive political struggle occurred in the Soviet Union. Vladimir Lenin, leader of the former Bolshevik Party and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, died on the 21st of January in 1924.[1] Lenin had held the party together since 1917 and had been the central person to determine its policies.[2] Without providing a clear successor, he left the party in chaos and the in-fighting and division could jeopardize or pull apart the Communist Party. Lenin's death did not occur at the right time and there were issues that the Soviet Union faced regarding to the route towards socialism, leadership in the party and the problems of a growing bureaucracy.[3] There were many conflicts between the key party leaders' personalities and this led to a struggle over power that lasted for the next five years. " This has led some historians to call it a struggle " over" power, rather than " for" power" since the Politburo members' priority was keeping each other out of power rather than gaining power for themselves.[4] Joseph Stalin was regarded as a minor player in the beginning and Trotsky was famously named as the " chief contender" of this massive power struggle. Trotsky was the most prominent and power Bolshevik leader since he was the commander of the Red Army from 29 August 1919 to 15 January 1925. However in 1929, Joseph Stalin emerged as the sole leader of the power struggle.

Although historians readily acknowledge Stalin as the sole leader in 1929, the question remains on how was Stalin able to become the Soviet Union's sole leader while he was regarded as a minor player who had no chance in defeating Trotsky. Two main interpretations dominated the debate over the relationship between Stalin's political skills and the weaknesses of his

opponents. Many historians hold the conviction that Stalin's political skills were too ruthless as Stalin himself admitted, " Yes, I am rough, rough on those who roughly and faithlessly try to destroy the Communist Party." [5] On the other hand, different historians seek to dissociate Stalin's personality from Trotsky's weaknesses. Those historians argued that Trotsky had no talent or tactic and had no intention to fight in the battle for power in the first place.

The purpose of this essay is to evaluate the factors that led to Stalin's rise to power over Trotsky. Though Stalin had a ruthless character, he was named Russia's third most popular historical figure in a nationwide poll despite the famine and purges that marked his rule. [6] The essay examines Stalin's political skills and personality, and the weakness of his opponents. Based on the result of this examination, it is possible to conclude that although Trotsky was the most powerful candidate, the nature of Stalin's personality and actions were noticeably stronger than Trotsky. Stalin had much desire and motivation to get to the top. Therefore, this essay will argue that the most significant reason for Stalin's uprising is his political abilities and personality. This investigation is worthy to examine because it may become a reference to future power struggles that are similar to Stalin's rise of power. After examining this topic, one can acknowledge that successful candidates must have a strong personality along with potential abilities that reaches the high expectations of this criterion.

1. Stalin's Political Skills and Personality

The most dominant factor that led to Joseph Stalin's success as the sole leader was his political skills and personality. This point of view is shared by <https://assignbuster.com/how-stalin-became-the-leader-of-the-soviet-history-essay/>

many historians and they tend to dissociate Leon Trotsky from the question of having no talent. Historian J. N. Westwood argued that Stalin was immensely cunning and wrote that “ Stalin stood back and watched his rivals dig their own graves”, likening his actions to a dog that steals a bone when two others are fighting over it.[7]This source is valuable because it was exactly what happened during the power struggle as Stalin swayed from the left wing to the right wing to eliminate all his opponents by the end of 1929. A former Politburo member, Nikolai Bukharin, also agreed that Stalin was ruthless and in his book, he wrote, “ Stalin is a Genghis Khan, an unscrupulous intriguer, who sacrifices everything else to the preservation of power... He changes his theories according to whom he needs to get rid of next.”[8]Hence, we can state that Stalin’s political personality played a significant role in the history of the power struggle. Bukharin, a former contender in the political battle can give us important historical answers however there are limitations. Since he was Stalin’s opponent, he would probably have his own views and therefore one can conclude that his historical information may be biased. There also seemed to be a minority opinion. Author, Theodore VonLaue disagrees with the major views and writes, “ What he (Stalin) lacked were the very qualities in which the former exiles excelled.”[9]One can refute Theodore’s point with major evidence from trusted historians therefore it seems that Stalin’s political skills were the most important reason for the downfall of Trotsky.

One of the most obvious advantages Stalin had over Trotsky was his immense positions of power gained with his political skills and personality. As, historian Chris Ward writes, “ Stalin’s personality cannot be divorced

from the world in which he functioned”.[10]Stalin was appointed head of the Workers and Peasants Inspectorate, in command of the Orgburo and he was a newly elected member of the Politburo which became the main organ of power.[11]In March 1919, Yakov Sverdlov died of Spanish flu and Lenin was left with a few top administrators to replace Sverdlov. At that time, Stalin had gained Lenin’s trust (since Stalin appeared very loyal to Lenin) and Lenin clearly did not want all the powers in one hand’s since Trotsky was already the Red Army’s commander. Therefore, he appointed Stalin over Trotsky as the party’s first General Secretary whom was in charge of the general organization.[12]Other Bolsheviks saw these jobs as a part of the dull routine of party bureaucracy and paid little attention to him which gave Stalin an enormous advantage as the “ Grey Blur” in the battle for power.[13]Having the position of a General Secretary was a crucial factor for the rise of Stalin. Stalin had control over every step of the hierarchy as he controlled the first step of ladder. He had the privilege to appoint new members who owed him their loyalty. Therefore having the title, General Secretary was effective to place supporters in key positions to win and deliver votes that outmaneuvered political opponents. Stalin could also set the agenda for the Politburo meetings so he controlled what the politburo talked about. Furthermore, he controlled the leaflets which meant that he had power over the enemies’ political image. Stalin was basically in control of the whole Political Machine in USSR after Lenin’s death.

After Lenin’s death, Stalin rose in power because of his cunning manipulative personality and it was shown in the event of Lenin’s Funeral. One can clearly tell how significant and effective Stalin’s skills because he wanted to portray

himself as the legitimate successor and destroy Trotsky's positive image as Lenin's chosen successor. Lenin died on the 21st of January 1924 and his funeral was held six days after his death in the Red Square.[14]The cult of Leninism had just begun after the Red Terror and Stalin gave it momentum at Lenin's Funeral by acting as a pallbearer and giving the oration with an oath of loyalty made to Lenin's legacy.[15]Stalin had contacted Trotsky, whom was resting in South Russia because of his illness. Having a cunning personality, Stalin convinced Trotsky to not attend Lenin's Funeral because he would not be able to arrive on time and by accepting Stalin's proposal, Trotsky's image was heavily injured. At the end of the Funeral, Stalin had a very successful outcome because the general public had the impression that he was designated to become Lenin's successor since it looked like he was taking on the "Mantle of Leninism".[16]This event showed how Trotsky's weaknesses were exploited by Stalin and used to gain better credibility. This event provides an overwhelming amount of evidence of how Stalin applied his clever but sinister tactics and it reflected on Stalin's true personality.

From 1922 onwards, Stalin's true personality was gradually more transparent. Stalin posed as a moderate in the Communist Party spectrum between Trotsky on the Left wing and Bukharin on the Right wing in the early 1920's.[17]He had avoided making definite policy decisions until 1928. This allowed him to stay away from political disputes within the party and he would be able to gain the support from the Liberals and the Conservatives. Stalin used policy disagreements to outflank and isolate his opponents and successfully presented the views of his opponents as anti-communist or anti-Leninist. This highlighted how Stalin successfully manipulated Lenin's Ban on

Factions by using his cunning strategies into his advantages. Robert Conquest stated that, " In six years Stalin outmanoeuvred a series of opponents; first in alliance with the rest of his colleagues, he opposed and demoted Trotsky. Then in alliance with the Bukharin-Rykov " Right" he defeated the Zinoviev-Kamenev " Left" bloc... and finally he and his own following attacked their hitherto allies, the " Rightists"."[18]Robert Conquest, a well known British historian, retold a section of the timeline when Stalin is rising to power. In one's opinion, Stalin was ruthless and did whatever it took to be the sole leader of Soviet Russia and historian R. Conquest along with Bukharin acknowledges Stalin switching sides with whoever he wanted to eliminate and evidently his cruel personality was exposed.

However, Stalin's strategy convinced people he was dull and mediocre, hence he was known as the " Grey Blur which left no trace".[19]This valuable quote demonstrated Stalin's strategic skills which gave him immunity to criticism because his personality was not known clearly. Sukhanov, the diarist of the revolution noted, " Stalin however, during the course of his modest activity in the Executive Committee, gave me the impression-and I was not alone in this view, of a grey blur which flickered obscurely and left no trace. There is really nothing more to be said about him."[20]By examining Sukhanov's diary, we can state that Stalin's political tactics gave him an opportunity to blend in the background. In another example, Deutscher had the same point of view in his review, " He carefully followed the course of debate to see what way the wind was blowing and invariably voted with the majority, unless he had assured his majority beforehand."[21]Stalin's personality had turned the political battle into a

nightmare and his perceived objective was simply to be the last surviving person in the Politburo by eliminating other players first using his gifts from Lenin.

Stalin used his external circumstances created by Lenin, very wisely. By analyzing how he incorporated them to his advantage, we would be able to observe his political mindset. Policies like the Ban on Factions, the nomenklatura system and Lenin's enrolment were clear examples. The ban on factions, created by Lenin in 1921, called for unity and an end to splits and factionalism as Lenin stated, " All members of the Russian Communist Party who are in the slightest degree suspicious or unreliable ... should be got rid of" and this was a massive advantage that enabled Stalin to get rid of his rivals easily after Lenin's death.[22]The nomenklatura system was established from 1923 onwards and decision making only applied to a few hands in the Communist Party whom most of the voters were loyal Stalinists. The Lenin's enrolment was a recruitment campaign that started in 1923 and it increased the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 340, 000 members to about 600, 000 members by 1925. Although Lenin Enrolment was supposedly for party purposes, General Secretary, Stalin, controlled or vetoed the party list for his own personal gain by placing his supporters in places of political power. These external circumstances were devastating weapons in the hands of Stalin whom could basically control the votes at party congresses.

There had also been evidence of his ruthlessness in the 1922 Georgian Affair. Stalin was born in 1878 to a peasant Georgian cobbler family as Iosif Dzhugashvili and changed his name to Stalin as " Man of Steel" later on. <https://assignbuster.com/how-stalin-became-the-leader-of-the-soviet-history-essay/>

[23]He grew up was a violent and lawless place and was frequently involved in brawls with other children.[24]Stalin lived a peasant life and he was uneducated but had a unique personality. Stalin hated Georgia and his harshness in imposing the Bolshevik rule on his native country, Georgia, shocked many people including Lenin.[25]Lenin wrote in his testament, “ Stalin is too rude”.[26]Stalin’s daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva had the same point of view and in an interview she said, “” He was a very simple man. Very rude. Very cruel.” Svetlana also said, “” He broke my life. I want to explain to you. He broke my life twice.”[27]Sources from Svetlana are very valuable and reliable since it was Stalin’s daughter and it provides a first person’s point of view on Stalin’s real personality. In Svetlana’s memoir, “ Twenty letters to a friend” she described her father’s personality and she wrote, “ At this point, and this was where his cruel, implacable nature showed itself, the past ceased to exist for him. Years of friendship and fighting side by side in a common cause might as well never have been.”[28]Surprisingly, Stalin’s daughter had a very bad image of her father as she wrote, “ In his cold-blooded way he cared about only one thing. How is X conducting himself now? Does he admit his mistakes?” This source informs us Stalin’s true personality. He himself did not admit to any wrongdoings and only blames it on his opponents. In one’s opinion, he had a very cruel but strong personality and Svetlana has the same view, “ He is gone, but his shadow still stands over all of us. It still dictates to us and we, very often, obey.”[29]Stalin’s personality was mainly caused by his background and he had learned life the hard way through an independent life. Stalin was not considered an intellectual like Trotsky. However, he had the power to lead equals whom Trotsky lacked through manipulation and <https://assignbuster.com/how-stalin-became-the-leader-of-the-soviet-history-essay/>

cunning. Stalin's had no fear of behaving immorally or of getting his hands dirty and this contributed largely to his success in taking over the party by 1929.