

Joseph stalin



During the years following the death of Lenin in 1924, there was an immense power struggle in the politburo of the Communist Party, as its leading figures competed to replace him. By 1929, Joseph Stalin had defeated his rivals – and therefore become leader of the party – through three stages: the defeat of the left opposition (and therefore Trotsky), the united opposition (Zinoviev, Kamenev and Trotsky), and finally the right deviation (Bukharin).

Stalin gained power due to a number of factors, particularly his position as General Secretary of the party, along with his other roles, but also through errors made by the Bolsheviks, most notably their underestimation and dismissal of Stalin.

However, his position as General Secretary gave Stalin such tight control over the party machine that, although the failure to publish Lenin's testament and general underestimation of Stalin were contributing factors, this role was the main reason for his success in the power struggle.

Stalin held the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1922 onwards, which was an incredibly powerful place to be, and aided him immensely during the power struggle. The role was predominantly bureaucratic and many people were unaware of the influence that Stalin held; being General Secretary, he could control membership of the party, which won him popularity with the peasants, whose social standing and benefits were raised by becoming party members.

As the majority of the Soviet population consisted of peasants, this gave Stalin a solid base of support during the power struggle. This was emphasized by his other roles, for example he was Head of Workers and

Peasants Inspectorate, and Peoples Commissar for Nationalities, both of which allowed Stalin to make connections all over the country in seemingly ‘low-level’ positions, meaning that he was able to fill the central committee with his supporters during important votes, effectively controlling the entire system to support his campaign in the power struggle.

This was especially useful when rivals opposed Stalin and tried to usurp him, as any movements carried against him were instantly outvoted by Stalin’s supporters, demonstrated during the defeat of the United Opposition (Stage 2 of the power struggle) where every attack made by Zinoviev and Kamenev was instantly quelled by Stalin’s unparalleled control of the voting. The influence Stalin held over the party machine allowed him to manipulate any situation to his means, undermine the power of his opponents and make vital connections, gaining loyalists whom he could place in powerful positions, giving him incontrovertible control in the party. Despite the view that Stalin’s roles were unimportant and bureaucratic, he used them to gain access to the highest control and therefore his position as General Secretary (and other positions), was the most important reason for his rise to power.

However, there were other reasons for Stalin’s success in the power struggle, as the contending Bolsheviki made many errors during the years 1924-29, whether they were general mistakes or errors made by individuals. It is the underestimation of Stalin that allowed him to build a strong political power base largely unnoticed. Stalin was often described by other leaders as “Comrade Card-Index” or the “grey blur”, due to the view that he was a dull bureaucrat holding no real influence.

People were more concerned about Trotsky, who was the most obvious contender for the Lenin's replacement and had the makings of a military dictator – leadership of the Red Army and a strong supporter of radical change – so the fear of radical Trotsky overshadowed any concern about the 'moderate' Stalin. Most failed to see that he was gradually manipulating the role of General Secretary of the Bolshevik Party into the key post in the Soviet Union, building a strong following and maintaining his image as a moderate whilst his rivals publicly battled, ruining each others reputations and leaving Stalin's untarnished.

Before his death, Lenin became uneasy about the amount of power in Stalin's control, and in his testament – which gave opinions of each party member – he expressed concern that Stalin had 'concentrated an enormous power in his hand' and could not always be trusted to use this wisely. Had Stalin's opposition published Lenin's Testament during the conflict for leadership, he would never have made it to power and Russian history would be very different.

However the fact remains that they failed to publish this until it was too late; Zinoviev, Kamenev and Trotsky attempted to publish the testament in 1926 but Stalin was already too strong – he ordered the secret police to remove the illicit copies, leaving the United Opposition to appear desperate and undermined. These general errors by the Bolsheviks made Stalin's rise to power easier, as they could have ended his political career if people had recognized his vast control and power within the party.

In addition to the general errors of the Bolsheviks, each contender made mistakes that allowed Stalin to gain the upper hand in each stage of the

power struggle. For example Trotsky did not attend Lenin's funeral – he claimed Stalin told him the wrong date – and therefore appeared disrespectful to Lenin, while Stalin carried Lenin's coffin and made a speech, appearing loyal and one of Lenin's 'disciples'. Trotsky also made the mistake of factionalism after the ban on factions in 1921, along with Zinoviev and Kamenev when they attempted to oppose Stalin and Bukharin's alliance during stage two of the power struggle.

This meant Stalin was able to expel them from the party, eliminating them as opposition once and for all. As well as creating a faction, Zinoviev and Kamenev tarnished their image in stage one of the struggle, as they publicly battled Trotsky, ruining their reputations, whilst Stalin sat back and watched, reputation intact. After their public conflict and defeat of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev then formed an alliance with him to form the United Opposition, which was not credible, and seen as a slightly desperate attempt for power, leaving Stalin seem like the voice of reason.

Bukharin and the right of the party made less obvious oversights, however Stalin won out in the third stage by making the Great Turn, whereby he shifted his ideologies from the NEP when it began to fail. Bukharin was slightly naive in thinking that Stalin and their shared policy of Socialism in One Country were compatible with the NEP, but when Stalin made a u-turn he realized that was not possible and Bukharin was exposed to criticism.

Afraid of factionalism accusations, Bukharin was unable to rally support and was easily defeated by Stalin, leaving him victorious and leader of the Party. Another factor that favoured Stalin was his chosen ideologies, which appealed to the population and party. Stalin manoeuvred his political

standing to benefit him, and his position as a moderate made it easy for him to change policy without looking like a hypocrite, if needed.

A prime example of this is the debate of Rapid Industrialization against the NEP: initially Stalin supported the NEP during his alliance with Bukharin in order to defeat the United Opposition, however once they had won Stalin made 'the Great Turn' and became pro-Rapid Industrialization, pointing out the flaws in the NEP and undermining Bukharin's authority. This helped Stalin because the country had become disillusioned with the NEP; people had not benefitted the way they had hoped, particularly the proletariat.

Rapid Industrialization promised a brighter future, with Russia as a military and industrial powerbase and an idealistic communist state where everybody worked hard and reaped the rewards as one, or at least that is the picture he painted for the Russian public. Furthermore, Stalin's ideology of 'Socialism in One Country' was much more popular than Trotsky's idea of 'Permanent Revolution', as Stalin's focus on the USSR seemed much more patriotic, making Trotsky seem less than committed to communist Russia, as he wanted to expand communism abroad and help other countries, seen as disloyalty to Russia.

Stalin was seen as a moderate before he came to power, and people were more attracted to collective leadership as this seemed more in the communist spirit, whereas Trotsky was an advocate of dictatorship, and people were concerned he was more interested in 'Bonapartism': that he would use his leadership of the Red Army to become a military dictator like Napoleon Bonaparte.

Stalin used these three ideological debates to overcome his competitors, finally outwitting Bukharin over the NEP as it flagged in the late 1920s, adapting his policy to the situation around him, which is another reason for his success. Overall, Stalin came to power through a number of factors: his own positions within government, particularly General Secretary, the mistakes of his opposition, and his chosen ideologies regarding certain key issues at the time.

Although his standing on issues such as the NEP, and the fact that everybody underestimated him certainly helped him in his rise to power, it was Stalin's tight control of the party machine that secured his success, which he influenced through his role as General Secretary. Stalin manipulated this position so that he was in charge of the party's affairs, and nobody suspected him as his campaign was not as overt as Trotsky's, effectively 'scheming' his way to the top, which is why Stalin being General Secretary is the main reason for his triumph in the power struggle.