

INVESTIGATION

The question of this investigation is “*Did events and circumstances play the main role in Stalin’s bid for power in Russia 1924-1929?*”

The overall aim is to investigate the importance of individuals in History. Some historians focus on Stalin’s personal skills and the personal mistakes/weakness of his opponents.¹ Other historians claim that Stalin was a product of Russian history, the growth of the bureaucracy and its patronage system.² A third interpretation emphasize the ideological based decisions made in 1921 and 1927. This emphasize the circumstances.³

Leo Trotsky seemed to be the obvious choice to succeed Lenin in 1924. Five years later Trotsky had been forced into exile and other competitors had been defeated by Stalin who became the ruler of the USSR. This raise the question if it was his personal skills and the opponent’s weaknesses or if it was events and circumstances that brought him to power?

The 10th Party Congress 1921 and Party split. The revolution in October 1917 was followed by Civil War in Russia. The Bolsheviks⁴ adapted an economic policy during the war called “*War Communism*”. The Communist Party tightened and centralized the rule which in March 1921 led to a revolt at one of the Bolshevik strongholds, the Navy Base Kronstadt outside Petrograd.⁵ The 10th Party Congress 1921 therefore introduced a ban on factions within the Party and a ban on opposition parties in the soviets.⁶ To deal with the serious economic situation the same congress introduced NEP (New Economic Policy). These two decisions split the Party.⁷ When Lenin suffered his first stroke in May 1922 personal rivalries between leading communists over economic policies, political democracy and other issues became evident.⁸ Leaders of the radical “*left*”: Zinoviev, Kamenev and Trotsky criticized NEP and wanted to change the economic policies towards communism. The leaders of the moderate “*right*”, Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky, favored NEP and wanted a continuation.⁹ Stalin avoided to side with any of the groups. In 1922 he was approached by Zinoviev and Kamenev. They both had a strong position within the Party and believed they could succeed Lenin. Trotsky’s position within the army was strong. That’s why they asked Stalin to block Trotsky via his control of party appointments and organization. Stalin agreed to try.¹⁰ *Stalin had nothing to do with the decisions made at the 10th Party Congress, but he had a unique position within the bureaucracy which meant he was given an opportunity to use this position. The ideological based decisions together with the idea of using Stalin’s position within the bureaucracy (structural reasons) supports the theory of events and circumstances playing in favor of Stalin.*

Stalin’s position within the Communist Party enabled his take-over. Stalin had joined the Communist Party early.¹¹ He supported the revolution in October 1917 and became a Commissar for Nationalities in 1917.¹² In April 1922, Stalin was appointed general secretary of the Party. This position gave him power to

¹ In Historiography referred to as “liberal” or “power politics” historians. Landers, p. 1-48; Toll & Waller, p. 21-23

² In Historiography referred to as “structural” historians. Landers, p. 1-48; Toll & Waller, p. 21-23

³ In Historiography referred to as the “ideological approach”. Landers, p. 1-48; Toll & Waller, p. 21-23

⁴ Bolsheviks – after March 1918 known as communists

⁵ Shub, p. 405

⁶ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/10thcong/ch04.htm>

⁷ Todd & Waller, p. 14

⁸ Todd & Waller, p 15

⁹ Lynch, p. 25

¹⁰ Todd & Waller, p. 16

¹¹ Mimmack, Senés & Price, p. 98. Stalin had joined the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1901. In 1905 he met Lenin and became part of the Bolshevik Party.

¹² Lynch, p. 21

appoint and dismiss Party officials.¹³ He was already a member of the Politburo, the Orgburo and the liaison officer between these two departments. This position gave him an understanding and position to monitor the Communist Party's policies and personal.¹⁴ Stalin also had certain control over the situation in other parts of the bureaucracy in his position as Head of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate.¹⁵ Stalin used his authority to place his own supporters in key positions. Since they owed their place to him, Stalin could count on their support in the voting in the various committees which made up the organization of the Party and the government.¹⁶ To expand the membership of the Party Stalin began the decided "*Lenin enrollment*". Between 1922-25 the membership went from 340,000 in 1922 to 600,000.¹⁷ In every case it was members of the Secretariat, working directly under Stalin as General Secretary, who had issued the invitations.¹⁸ ***Stalin actively used his positions within the bureaucracy which gave him the means to better his own position within the Party. This supports the theory of structural circumstances together with his personal abilities (liberal/power politics).***

Dethrone and isolate Trotsky. At the 12th Party Congress in April 1923 Trotsky looked like Lenin's successor. At this meeting Stalin was re-elected as general secretary. He started to replace Trotsky's supporters with those of the triumvirs, especially those who were loyal to him.¹⁹ A new enlarged Central Committee was elected. Only three were supporters of Trotsky. By the end of 1923, Stalin had enough control of the party machine at local level to ensure that most of his nominees were elected to future congresses.²⁰ When Lenin died Stalin deliberately gave Trotsky the wrong date about the funeral – so Trotsky could not make it back in time. During the funeral Stalin acted like Lenin's successor. Trotsky's absence was noted and used in the propaganda against him.²¹

A short episode that could have ended Stalin's career took place during the 13th Party Congress 1924. Lenin's widow Krupskaya revealed "*Lenin's Testament*" which criticized Stalin strongly and asked the Congress to replace him. Kamenev and Zinoviev plead for Stalin and asked the Central Committee to not act or publish the testament.²² The Central Committee listened, and Stalin was not replaced.

In November 1924 Trotsky acted against the attempt to isolate him by publishing "*Lessons of October*".²³ It showed how close his views were to those of Lenin. It also showed how Zinoviev and Kamenev had opposed Lenin on several important issues. Stalin was not mentioned.²⁴ In 1924 Stalin presented his idea of "*Socialism in one country*" as a counterweight against Trotsky's support of a "*Permanent Revolution*".²⁵ The focus on Russia instead of a permanent international revolution appealed to members of the Party.

The campaign against Trotsky succeeded and in January 1925 Trotsky resigned as Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs.²⁶ ***Stalin's use of this position within the Party and a popular suggestion (Socialism in one country) together with Trotsky's inability to act (his weakness) shows how individual actions works in Stalin's favor. Stalin's political career is connected to his position within the bureaucracy and his growing support thanks to the use of the patronage system. This is a structural circumstance.***

¹³ Volkogonov, p. 68 & 79; Todd & Waller, p. 16

¹⁴ Lynch, p. 21

¹⁵ Volkogonov, p. 70

¹⁶ Lynch, p. 21. Patronage: (patron of new party officials) they owed certain loyalty to him, as he made them Party officials.

¹⁷ <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1924/05/24.htm>

¹⁸ Mimmack, Senés & Price, p. 105 / Lynch, p. 22

¹⁹ Service, p. 213

²⁰ Todd & Waller, p. 17.

²¹ Service 219 & 223; Lynch, p. 23

²² Todd & Waller, p. 17; <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/lenin-testament.asp>

²³ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/index.htm>

²⁴ Todd & Waller, p. 17. The idea of "*Socialism in One Country*" was presented in the second edition of Stalin's lectures on the "*Foundations of Leninism*" 1924 (A collection of nine lectures he delivered at the Sverdlov University that year, later published in Pravda). <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1924/foundations-leninism/index.htm>

²⁵ Mimmack, Senés & Price, p. 105

²⁶ Ibid

Stalin against Zinoviev and Kamenev. In April 1925 Zinoviev and Kamenev openly criticized Stalin's proposal of Socialism in One Country. They formed the “*New Opposition*”. This group started a campaign to end NEP, withdraw concessions to the peasants and enforce industrialization.²⁷ The Party Congress declined the demands of the New Opposition. The Right backed Stalin and outvoted the Left bloc. This occurred when the membership of the Politburo increased to nine. Three new members – Molotov, Kalinin and Voroshilov, all supporters of Stalin, were voted on.²⁸ In July 1926, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Krupskaya and a few other prominent Party members formed the United Opposition. Stalin's positions enabled him to ban their meetings and dismiss their supporters. He followed it up by accusing them of breaking the 1921 ban on factions.²⁹ In October 1927 Zinoviev and Trotsky were removed from the Central Committee.³⁰ Volkogonov commented on the situation in 1926-27. “*Paradoxical as it may seem, it was Trotsky, more than anything else, who strengthened Stalin's position.*”³¹ ***Stalin used the ban on factions from 1921. He also used the general fear of Trotsky and Trotsky's previous critique of Zinoviev and Kamenev. The continuing recruitment of his supporters to the growing bureaucracy shows how Stalin uses his personal skills in his favor.***

War Scare 1926-27 and fall of the Right Opposition: A war scare arose in 1926-27 when multiple Western states began cutting off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.³² The fear of invasion from the West left a strong need for rapid industrialization to increase Soviet war-making potential. The war scare together with previous periods of starvation led the peasants to start hoarding which inflated the bread prize. Stalin now advocated stronger policies against the peasants and the NEP system. He claimed that the Soviet state should control the economy.³³ Bukharin declared in the Politburo and at the Party Congress in 1928 that Stalin's aggressive policy was counterproductive. He compared it to Trotsky's previous suggestions and accused Stalin of being a “*Trotskyite*”.³⁴ The situation in Russia with rising bread prizes, workers being dissatisfied and leftists supporting Stalin led to the defeat of the Right Opposition. They were also accused of “*factionalism*”. In April 1929, Bukharin was removed as editor of Pravda and, in November 1929, he was removed from the Politburo. Both Rykov and Tomsy were removed from their positions.³⁵ Stalin was now in control. ***We can see how circumstances, the War Scare, played an important role. Stalin used the situation and once again used the 1921 decision – the “ban on factionalism” to get rid of the “rightist opposition”.***

The conclusion of this essay is that the ideological based decisions and the structural circumstances played an important role when Stalin became the leader of the USSR. Without them Stalin would not have been able to use his personal skills and his opponent's weaknesses.

²⁷ Lynch, p. 27

²⁸ Mimmack, Senés & Price, p. 105

²⁹ Todd & Waller, p. 18

³⁰ Volkogonov, p. 134–136

³¹ Ibid, p. 137

³² Sontag, p. 66. The British government, angry at Soviet interference in the general strike of 1926 and at evidence of military support for revolutionaries in China, severed diplomatic relations.

³³ Mimmack, Senés & Price, p. 106

³⁴ Lynch, p. 28

³⁵ Volkogonov, p. 183

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