



2 Stalin and Russia

1 Origins and rise, 1924–29

Key questions

- What was the historical context of Stalin's struggle for power?
- What were the key stages of the power struggle?
- Why did Stalin emerge as leader of the Soviet Union?

Overview

- This unit deals with the context of Joseph Stalin's rise to power and the methods he used to establish himself as leader during the 1920s. Unlike the other leaders discussed in this book, Stalin rose to power in what was already a single-party state.
- The origins and development of a single-party state in Russia lie in the political and economic problems of tsarist Russia, the impact of the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917, and the civil war of 1918 to 1921. By the time of Vladimir Lenin's death in January 1924, Soviet Russia had been, in practice, a one-party state for almost three years.
- Stalin's rise to power was unexpected: most of those who later became his victims or unwilling accomplices underrated his abilities and did not realise until it was too late how powerful he was becoming.
- Stalin's rise to power in the 1920s can be divided into three stages: early moves against Leon Trotsky; the defeat of the left; and the defeat of the right. Once the right had been defeated, Stalin was left in a powerful – but not yet all-powerful – position.
- Before Lenin died in 1924, rivalries and differences between other leading communists such as Trotsky, Grigori Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev came to the fore.
- In December 1922, Lenin wrote a *Testament* outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the main leaders. In January 1923, he added a *Postscript* recommending Stalin's dismissal.
- Zinoviev and Kamenev made an alliance with Stalin, known as the 'triumvirate'. Their aim was to prevent Trotsky from replacing Lenin.
- Once Trotsky had been defeated, Stalin turned on Zinoviev and Kamenev. Zinoviev and Kamenev united with Trotsky, but Stalin was able to defeat this United Opposition.
- By 1929, Stalin had also defeated Nikolai Bukharin and the right of the Communist Party. His main rival, Trotsky, was then exiled from the Soviet Union – Stalin was now sole ruler of the party.

Timeline

1921 Mar: Kronstadt Rebellion; 10th Party Congress; NEP is adopted

1922 Apr: Stalin becomes general secretary of the Communist Party

Dec: Lenin writes his last *Testament*; triumvirate is formed against Trotsky

1923 Jan: Lenin's *Postscript* recommends Stalin's dismissal

Feb: triumvirs begin their campaign against Trotsky

1924 Jan: Lenin dies

May: Central Committee keeps Lenin's *Testament* secret and decides not to dismiss Stalin

1925 Jan: Trotsky is dismissed as commissar for war

May: Leningrad Opposition starts

Dec: 14th Party Congress; Leningrad Opposition is outvoted

1926 July: United Opposition is formed

1927 Nov: Trotsky and Zinoviev are expelled from the Communist Party, and Kamenev from the Central Committee

Dec: 15th Party Congress; Zinoviev and Kamenev end United Opposition

1928 Jan: Trotsky is deported to Alma-Ata

1929 Jan: Trotsky is deported to Constantinople

Apr: Bukharin is removed as editor of *Pravda*

Nov: Bukharin is removed from the Politburo

Question

This Soviet photo-montage of leading Bolsheviks, made in 1920, shows Lenin and Trotsky together in the centre of the picture. Stalin is absent. What does this tell us about Stalin's importance at this time?

Joseph Stalin (1880–1953)

Stalin's real name was Joseph Djughashvili. He joined the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), a Marxist Party, and sided with Lenin when the party split in 1903. Unlike most of the other communist leaders, he was not an intellectual. In 1917, he became Commissar for Nationalities and, in 1922, took on the role of general secretary of the Communist Party. After Lenin's death in 1924, he made himself supreme ruler. He remained head of the Soviet Union until his death in 1953, having executed many of his rivals in the purges of the 1930s.



A photo-montage, made in 1920, of the Bolshevik leaders

What was the historical context of Stalin's struggle for power?

The beginnings of **Stalin's** rise to power are to be found in the events that took place in Russia after the Revolution in November 1917, and especially in the political and economic problems of 1921–24.

Political and economic problems 1921–24

After the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917, Russia went through a civil war. The Bolsheviks (known as communists from March 1918) finally won in 1921, but there were sharp policy differences between the leading Bolsheviks, especially on economic policy. During the civil war, a policy known as War Communism had been adopted as an emergency measure. However, the economic damage suffered during the civil war, and then the Kronstadt Rising,

Fact

The Kronstadt Rising took place in March 1921 when sailors and workers at the Kronstadt naval base began an insurrection against War Communism and the political restrictions imposed by the Bolsheviks during the civil war.

led Lenin to persuade the party to adopt a New Economic Policy (NEP) at the 10th Party Congress in March 1921. This NEP not only ended War Communism, it also introduced a partial step back towards capitalism (see page 22).

The 1921 ban

The limited revival of capitalism and the shock of the Kronstadt Rising (which illustrated the Bolsheviks' growing isolation) also led the 10th Party Congress to introduce a ban on factions within the Communist Party and a ban on opposition parties in the **soviets**. Until then – even during the civil war – strong disagreements among communists had been normal, and parties such as the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries had continued to operate (despite temporary restrictions) within the soviets.

Several communists opposed the ban – Lenin later stated it was a temporary measure. It was not, however, a ban on inner-party opposition and dissent in general. Nonetheless, it was to play a crucial role in Stalin's rise to power.

Lenin's illness and the succession

In May 1922, **Lenin** had the first in a series of strokes, which increasingly restricted his ability to take an active part in politics. Meanwhile, arguments continued over economic policy, political democracy and other issues.

These arguments became bound up in personal rivalries between leading communists who, because of Lenin's ill health, began to consider what would happen if Lenin died. The most important communists after Lenin were the

This photo of Kamenev, Lenin and Trotsky was later 'doctored' by Stalin, as it showed his rivals as being close to Lenin; the 'doctored' version is inset



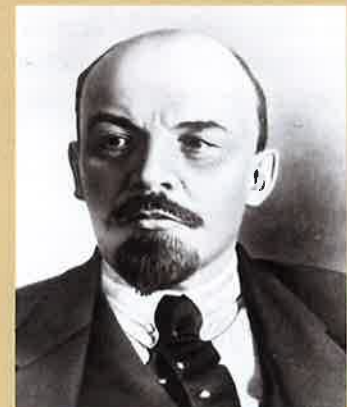
Question

Why was the Kronstadt Rising of 1921 so important for later political developments in the Soviet Union?

soviets Originally set up as strike committees, these workers' councils spread throughout Russia during 1917, with each town or rural soviet sending delegates to an All-Russian Congress of Soviets. After 1917, the soviets became the main political authority, in theory controlling the government. From 1917 to 1922, Russia was known as the 'Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic' (RSFSR). Thereafter, it was the 'Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR), or Soviet Union for short.

Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924)

Lenin (real name Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov) joined the RSDLP in 1898. He provoked a split in the RSDLP in 1903 and formed the Bolshevik faction. In exile from Russia until April 1917, he returned and pushed for the Bolsheviks to overthrow the Provisional Government in November 1917. He acted as prime minister from 1917 to 1924.



Politburo Short for Political Bureau, this was the Communist Party's body responsible for making political decisions.

Questions

What position did Stalin take on in 1922? How did this help him become the ruler of the Soviet Union?

triumvirate This term comes from the Latin for a group of three rulers (triumvirs) acting together.

bureaucracy This refers to the tendency for administrative directives from the centre to take the place of decisions arrived at democratically by party and soviet institutions. Bureaucracy first emerged as an emergency measure during the civil war, but continued afterwards and was greatly increased by Stalin as general secretary.

Fact

The existence of Lenin's *Testament* and *Postscript* was officially denied in the USSR until 1956. Only the top party leadership were aware of the existence of these documents – even local party leaders did not know about them.

Question

Why did Lenin write a *Postscript* to his *Testament* in January 1923?

other members of the **Politburo**, especially Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and Stalin. Of these, Trotsky seemed the most likely to replace Lenin. Zinoviev and Kamenev were also strong political leaders and had long been associated with Lenin. Bukharin, too, was a well-known and popular revolutionary leader.

Stalin was not well-known and seemed unlikely to emerge as a major leader. However, in April 1922, Stalin was appointed general secretary of the Communist Party. This position gave him the power to appoint and dismiss Communist Party officials.

Many leading communists resented Trotsky's rapid rise to the top of the party. This was in part because, while they had supported Lenin in 1903 over the Bolshevik–Menshevik split, Trotsky had only joined the Bolsheviks in August 1917. Zinoviev and Kamenev in particular believed they should succeed Lenin, and asked Stalin to help block Trotsky via his control of party appointments and organisation. In December 1922, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin formed an alliance – the **triumvirate** – to prevent Trotsky obtaining majority support.

Lenin's Testament

After October 1922, Lenin became more concerned about the political and personal tensions among leading communists. He proposed to Trotsky that they should form a 'Joint Bloc for Democracy' against growing signs of **bureaucracy** in the party and the state.

However, at the end of December, Lenin suffered a second stroke; he then dictated what he thought would be his last political Testament, outlining what he saw as the strengths and weaknesses of all the leading communists. In January 1923, concerned about Stalin's power, he added a *Postscript* recommending Stalin's removal. From then, until his death the following year, Lenin urged Trotsky on several occasions to launch a campaign against bureaucracy and for the restoration of party and soviet democracy.

SOURCE A

Since he became general secretary, Comrade Stalin has concentrated in his hands immeasurable power, and I am not sure that he will always know how to use that power with sufficient caution ...

Stalin is too rude, and this fault, entirely supportable in relations amongst us communists, becomes insupportable in the office of general secretary. Therefore, I propose to the comrades to find a way of removing Stalin from that position and to appoint another man who in all respects differs from Stalin only in superiority; namely, more patient, more loyal, more polite, less capricious, and more attentive to comrades.

Extracts from Lenin's Testament and Postscript, 25 December 1922 and 4 January 1923. Quoted in Lynch, M. 1990. Stalin and Khrushchev: The USSR 1924–64. London, UK. Hodder Arnold H&S. pp. 15–16.

What were the key stages of the power struggle?

Stage 1: The early moves against Trotsky, 1923–24

The triumvirs' campaign against Trotsky began in April 1923 at the 12th **Congress**. The traditional greetings from local parties – read out before the Congress started – all mentioned Lenin and Trotsky, but hardly any mentioned Stalin (showing that he was not considered a very important leader while Lenin was alive). However, with Lenin absent because of his poor health, the triumvirs isolated Trotsky. The Congress re-elected Stalin as general secretary and elected a new enlarged **Central Committee** – of the 40 members, only three were strong supporters of Trotsky. As general secretary, Stalin began to replace Trotsky's supporters with those of the triumvirs, especially those who were loyal to him. 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.

The formation of the Left Opposition

In October 1923, **Trotsky** formed the Left Opposition with others opposed to the policies of the triumvirs. Stalin immediately used his power to isolate them and, in January 1924, the 13th Party Conference condemned Trotsky's views. When Lenin died shortly afterwards, Stalin gave Trotsky (who was ill and on his way to convalesce on the Black Sea) the wrong date for Lenin's funeral, and then raised suspicions about Trotsky's absence.

Stage 2: The defeat of the Left Opposition, 1924–27

Stalin then dismissed many oppositionists from posts of responsibility. However, his position seemed threatened when, before the 13th Party Congress in May 1924, Lenin's widow revealed his *Testament* to the Central Committee and senior Congress delegates. However, Stalin was saved by Zinoviev and Kamenev. They persuaded the Central Committee not to act on or publish the *Testament*, thinking Stalin would now be seriously weakened and under their control.

In November 1924, following a campaign against 'Trotskyism', Trotsky's *Lessons of October* was published. This showed how close his views were to those of Lenin, and how Zinoviev and Kamenev had opposed Lenin on several important issues. As Stalin was not mentioned, Trotsky inadvertently strengthened Stalin's position. In January 1925, the triumvirs removed Trotsky from his position as commissar of war.

Divisions within the triumvirate

In 1925, disagreements about the New Economic Policy caused a split between the triumvirs, and left, centre and right factions emerged. Zinoviev and Kamenev led the left. In the summer of 1925, Zinoviev attacked Bukharin's rightist views. Stalin then began to remove Kamenev's supporters from their positions in the Moscow party, but Zinoviev's Leningrad base resisted.

At the 14th Congress in December 1925, Stalin ensured that the majority supported him and Bukharin, and a new Central Committee and Politburo were elected, both with a Stalinist–Bukharinist majority. Stalin then accused Zinoviev of Trotskyism and, in early 1926, Zinoviev lost the leadership of the Leningrad party to Sergei Kirov, one of Stalin's supporters. 'Zinovievists' then lost their positions in the party.

Congress In theory, this was the Communist Party's supreme decision-making body, made up of delegates elected by local party organs. At first, Congresses were held frequently, as were Conferences, which were held to decide on specific problems.

Central Committee In theory, this was the Communist Party's ruling body between Congresses. It was elected by Congress delegates. The Central Committee then elected the Politburo. In practice, the Politburo soon came to dominate the Central Committee and Congresses.

Leon Trotsky (1879–1940)

Trotsky's real name was Lev Bronstein. He sided with the Mensheviks against Lenin when the RSDLP split in 1903. However, he joined the Bolsheviks in 1917 and was the main organiser of the November Revolution. He led the Red Army during the civil war. Expelled from the Soviet Union in 1929, he set up the Fourth International, an international communist organisation, in 1938 while in Mexico. He was assassinated in Mexico by one of Stalin's agents in 1940.



Grigori Zinoviev (1883–1936)

Zinoviev joined the Bolsheviks and worked closely with Lenin from 1908 to 1917. He became the powerful leader of the Leningrad party and president of Comintern (the Communist International, an international communist organisation founded in Moscow in 1919). After Lenin's death in 1924, he worked with Kamenev and Stalin (the three were known as the triumvirs) to prevent Trotsky taking over. He later opposed Stalin and was executed in 1936.



The United Opposition – formation and defeat

In July 1926, Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev formed the United (Joint Left) Opposition, with some support from Nadya Krupskaya (Lenin's widow and a leading revolutionary in her own right) and a few other prominent party members. However, Stalin's control of the party enabled him to ban their meetings and dismiss their supporters. He then accused them of breaking the 1921 ban on factions and persuaded the Central Committee to remove Zinoviev from the Politburo. Only Trotsky now remained there to oppose him.

When one of Trotsky's supporters published Lenin's Testament in the New York Times, the Central Committee expelled Trotsky from the Politburo. The obvious isolation of the three Opposition leaders led Krupskaya (who feared splitting the Communist Party) to make her peace with Stalin.

An official cartoon of 1927, attacking the United Opposition, with Trotsky shown as the head of the house (seated right) in charge of Zinoviev (left) and Kamenev (centre)

Lev Kamenev (1883–1936)

Kamenev joined the Bolsheviks and was elected to their Politburo in 1917. He, like Zinoviev, had opposed Lenin's call for a second revolution in November, following the revolution in March 1917. He became the leader of the Moscow party organisation. As one of the triumvirs, he had supported Stalin immediately after Lenin's death but later joined with Zinoviev in forming a United Opposition with Trotsky. After this was defeated, he made peace with Stalin but was executed in 1936.

НЕОПРОВЕРЖИМОЕ ДОКАЗАТЕЛЬСТВО
Рис. К. Елисеева



САМ (глава семьи):—Мы были правы,—яблоку нам бросили шишку, калачи разные.— А что из этого следует? Что материальное положение рабочего класса тухло,—как мы и говорили.

In June 1927, Stalin tried to have Trotsky and Zinoviev expelled from the Central Committee. At first he failed, showing that his position was not yet totally secure. However, on 14 November, Stalin succeeded in having Trotsky and Zinoviev expelled from the Communist Party, and Kamenev expelled from the Central Committee. Hundreds of expulsions of lesser oppositionists then took place.

Stalin's actions shocked Zinoviev and Kamenev. One of their fears was that continued opposition to Stalin would result in the splitting of the Communist Party and the formation of an opposition party – something they saw as the 'gravest menace to Lenin's cause'. They believed the Communist Party was the only party capable of 'securing the conquests of October'. Then, attracted by signs that Stalin was about to abandon the NEP (see Unit 4), they ended their criticisms. By 10 December 1927 the United Opposition was over.

In January 1928, Trotsky was forcibly deported to Alma-Ata, near the Chinese border. Other oppositionists were deported elsewhere; many were moved to minor posts in other remote places in the USSR, to prevent them from communicating with one another.

A photograph of Trotsky (centre) and other oppositionist leaders on their way to exile in 1928



Stage 3: The defeat of the right, 1927–29

The final stage of the power struggle began almost immediately after the United Opposition had been defeated. By the autumn of 1927, bread shortages and high food prices led Stalin to adopt a new 'left' course for industry and agriculture. This produced a rift between the Bukharinists and the Stalinists over the continuation of the NEP. Many Bukharinists were removed from positions of power, thus strengthening Stalin's position.

Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938) Bukharin joined the Bolsheviks in 1906 and, at first, was on the left of the party. However, from 1924, he moved to the right and was the main defender of the NEP until 1928, when he was defeated by Stalin. He was allowed back into the party in the 1930s but was executed in 1938.

Initially, Trotsky had seen **Bukharin's** faction (bigger and more right-wing) as more dangerous to the gains of the November Revolution than Stalin's. By May 1928, with Stalin clearly planning a 'second revolution' (to move from the part-capitalist NEP to full socialism), some of Trotsky's supporters thought they should join Stalin against Bukharin and the right.

During July, the food crisis became worse (see page 45). Temporarily, it seemed that Bukharin's faction was gaining the upper hand when he won a vote in the Central Committee to slow Stalin's left turn. However, by August, Stalin had renewed his leftward course, and the breach with Bukharin was confirmed.

Both factions then turned to the defeated Left Oppositionists for support, although Stalin made no direct contacts. Bukharin persuaded Kamenev to contact Trotsky, saying he feared Stalin would 'strangle us'. Bukharin argued that Stalin was preparing to create a police state and take total power.

In September 1928, Trotsky and Bukharin considered an alliance to restore party and soviet democracy, but their respective supporters were reluctant. The right, who felt the New Economic Policy should be continued, were generally opposed to the left, who wished to end the NEP. On the other hand, the left objected to an alliance with the right at a time when Stalin seemed about to implement some of their own economic policies. Instead, they now preferred an alliance with Stalin and the centre rather than with the right. Trotsky's willingness to consider such an alliance lost him some supporters amongst the left, thus making it easier for Stalin to isolate him. Bukharin and the right, now in panic, surrendered to Stalin, while the left remained divided. Thus Stalin had managed to defeat both factions by relying solely on his own supporters.

However, Stalin now decided to make the Politburo expel Trotsky from Soviet Russia. This was partly because Stalin feared a left-right alliance in the future and partly because he suspected some of his own faction had some sympathy with the Opposition. In February 1929, Trotsky was finally deported from Alma-Ata in Turkestan to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).

During the same period, Stalin moved against the right. In January 1929, on the fifth anniversary of Lenin's death, Bukharin made a speech entitled 'Lenin's political testament' – a clear allusion to Lenin's call in 1923 for Stalin to be dismissed from his posts. Bukharin's speech and his meeting with Kamenev the previous year led Stalin to accuse Bukharin of 'factionalism' at a meeting of the Central Committee. Bukharin made a spirited defence of the principle of collective leadership, and criticised Stalin's policies, but the charge of factionalism was confirmed in February. In April 1929, Bukharin was removed as editor of **Pravda** and, in November 1929, he was removed from the Politburo. Stalin now appeared to have almost complete control of the Communist Party.

Activity

Carry out some further research on the membership of the three factions during the power struggle. Then complete a chart, with the headings 'Left', 'Centre' and 'Right'. Under these headings, write the names of the leading members of each faction, giving details of positions held and what happened to them later.

Pravda This was the Bolshevik/Communist Party newspaper. Its name is Russian for 'Truth'. It was first edited by Stalin and later by Bukharin.

Why did Stalin emerge as leader of the Soviet Union?

Historians differ in their opinions about the reasons for Stalin's emergence and rise to power, as no one factor seems to offer a satisfactory explanation. In fact, the main historical interpretations often overlap in several respects.

Power politics

According to this view, Stalin's rise can be seen as resulting from his deliberate and skilful manipulation of genuine political and ideological differences amongst the Bolshevik leaders. Robert Conquest, for example, argues that Stalin's aim was simply to gain supreme power by crushing all other factions; Robert C. Tucker argues that Stalin's aim was to make himself into a revolutionary hero as important and famous as Lenin. Stalin's success is seen as dependent not only on his political shrewdness and ruthlessness, but also on the weaknesses and mistakes of his rivals.

Zinoviev and Kamenev have been portrayed as, respectively, careerist and weak willed (Edward Carr), while Bukharin's commitment to the NEP is seen as having blinded him to the dangers posed by Stalin until it was too late (Stephen Cohen). Perhaps more importantly, Lenin himself did not realise the threat from Stalin until 1922, just two years before his death. For most of those two years, Lenin was too ill to be politically active.

Stalin's main opponent, Trotsky, can be seen as having made several serious errors and miscalculations – perhaps because he dismissed Stalin as a 'grey blur' and a 'mediocrity'. Trotsky also either refused, or did not have the skill, to organise a faction of his own. However, it has been argued that without Lenin he was virtually isolated at the top of the party from the beginning (Isaac Deutscher).

Structuralist explanations

While there are several different structuralist explanations, they have one theme in common: that Stalin was a product of Russian history and the administrative system set up after 1917.

Some historians see Stalin as essentially a ruler in the long tsarist tradition of absolutist rule – the 'Red Tsar'. Others point to the impact of the civil war, which led to the development of appointment rather than election for party and state positions. As the administrative apparatus grew, so did Stalin's power to appoint at both national and local level. As a result, bureaucracy increased, enabling Stalin to control party congresses, the Central Committee and the Politburo itself. Robert Daniels calls this a 'circular flow of power', by which Stalin appointed local party leaders, who in turn controlled elections to party organisations.

In addition, the Revolution and civil war had led to the displacement or death of the militant industrial workers who had been the Bolsheviks' main supporters between 1917 and 1921. The survivors were later given administrative posts in the government, army or party. They were replaced in the factories by workers from peasant traditions, which had tended to support the Social Revolutionaries rather than the Bolsheviks. As a result, elected soviets seemed less likely to support Bolshevik policies and were increasingly ignored by the government.

Robert Conquest

- Stalin's aim to gain supreme power by crushing all other factions

Robert C. Tucker

- to make himself into a revolutionary hero as famous as Lenin
- also weaknesses of the rivals

Edward Carr

Zinoviev & Kamenev weak willed

Stephen Cohen

Bukharin's commitment to the NEP → did not understand Stalin's danger

Robert Daniels

"Circular flow of power"
- S. appointed local party leaders

As the administrative bureaucracy grew, the communist leaders were forced to recruit former tsarist bureaucrats. These bureaucrats had administrative experience, but lacked initiative and often had contempt for the people and a supine attitude to authority. This, too, led the communist leaders to stress strict central control. The Stalinist bureaucratic state was thus a logical outcome.

3

Socio-cultural explanations

Socio-cultural explanations of Stalin's rise to power are closely linked to structural explanations. They emphasise the impact of the social structure on the politics and development of the Communist Party and the Soviet state. During the civil war, for example, the Bolsheviks attracted Russian patriots who resented the foreign intervention used by the Whites (anti-Bolsheviks) (Sheila Fitzpatrick). Then, when it looked as if the Reds (Bolsheviks) were winning, a large number of careerists flocked to join the winning side. This situation worsened after 1921, when all opposition parties were banned. In addition, many new party members (often ex-peasants) had no real understanding of Marxism or recent Bolshevik history. All these groups were easily manipulated by the party leadership.

4

Ideological explanations

Several historians stress the genuine political differences among the communist leaders of the 1920s, especially over the **NEP**. In particular, E. H. Carr, Alexander Erlich and Moshe Lewin have treated the ideological positions argued by the leading Bolsheviks as much more than mere fronts to hide any personal desire for power. The left feared the NEP might eventually lead to the restoration of capitalism, especially as many of the new groups (ex-tsarist bureaucrats or ex-peasants) tended to favour capitalist rather than socialist policies.

The right argued that, as the Soviet Union was overwhelmingly agricultural and backward, while industry was in crisis the NEP was essential if the economy was to revive. However, the right tended to overlook the conflicts that might arise between the **kulaks** and the **nepmen** on the one hand, and the workers' state on the other, and seemed to envisage a long period of a mixed economy.

Thus Stalin's rise can be seen as a genuine political response by the centre to steer a midway policy course. But, later, the centre came to see that a change was needed – it became necessary to attack the policies of the right, who wished the NEP to continue.

Stalin's policies can thus be seen as consistent and in tune with the bulk of the party membership, who desired stability above all. Stalin's policy of continuing the NEP and 'socialism in one country' (see page 25) seemed safer than the idea of Trotsky's 'permanent revolution', and it also appealed to national pride. Stalin's dramatic change of course in the years 1927–28 can be seen as a response to a real crisis. This was one reason why so many ex-oppositionists moved to support him in 1928.

One interpretation of Stalin's rise, which combines elements of the socio-cultural explanation, is that developed by Trotsky himself. Pointing to the failure of international revolution and the consequent isolation of the new Soviet state, Trotsky argued that early soviet democracy was undermined by

NEP The New Economic Policy (NEP) was an economic policy proposed by Lenin and adopted in 1921. It involved allowing small, privately owned firms and traders to operate. It also established an alliance or *smychka* with the peasants, allowing them to sell some of their surplus produce in private markets. However, the state remained in control of the main industrial enterprises and of foreign trade. Many workers referred to the NEP as the 'New Exploitation of the Proletariat'.

kulak A *kulak* was a rich peasant (named from the Russian word for a fist, i.e. a grasping fist). There were two other categories of peasants: *seredniak* (a middle peasant) and *bedniak* (a poor peasant).

nepmen Nepmen were traders and middlemen who began to grow wealthy under the NEP.

Russian backwardness and the growing political apathy of the working class. This allowed conservative and reactionary elements to come to the fore, and eventually resulted in what he called 'bureaucratic degeneration'. Trotsky argued that a new social and political élite – not a new class – with increasing privileges emerged. At first, members of this élite supported the right but then shifted to Stalin and the centre as the best bet for maintaining their positions. Thus Stalin's victory was the result of unforeseen historical and cultural developments after 1917 rather than the mistakes of his opponents.

End of unit activities

- 1 Draw a spider diagram and, using the information from this unit and any other materials available, make brief notes under the relevant headings for the different theories about the reasons for Stalin's success in the power struggle. Try to mention specific historians.
- 2 Carry out some additional research on the various political issues that began to turn Lenin against Stalin continuing in the post of general secretary. Which one do you think was most significant: a) from Lenin's viewpoint; and b) for the immediate future of the Soviet Union?
- 3 Produce a chart with two columns – 'Mistakes by the left' and 'Stalin's tactics' – to show the main tactical errors made by the various Left Opposition groups in the years 1922–29 and the corresponding actions taken by Stalin. Which do you think was the most important factor behind Stalin's success in the power struggle – the mistakes of his rivals, or his own political and organisational skills?
- 4 Find out more about Bukharin and his Right Opposition. Then write a couple of paragraphs to explain what you consider to be the biggest mistake they made during the power struggle. Do you think there was a point at which they could have blocked Stalin's rise before 1929?
- 5 Stalin has been described as a 'Red Tsar'. Find out more about what is meant by this term. Then imagine you are a lawyer – either for the defence or the prosecution – and draw up a case to prove/disprove the allegation. You can 'summon' specific historians to support your case.
- 6 Working in pairs, develop arguments for a class presentation on: a) how Trotsky could have prevented Stalin's rise; and b) why Trotsky's position was already too weak by 1924 for him to stop Stalin winning the power struggle.

Activity

Using the information in the section 'Why did Stalin emerge as leader of the Soviet Union?', produce a chart summarising the main historical interpretations and explanations of why Stalin was able to come to power. Remember to include the names of relevant historians.

Historical debate

Historians are divided over the links between the methods of rule adopted by Lenin from 1917 to 1924 and those used later by Stalin. Read the extract from Lenin's *Testament* and *Postscript* (Source A on page 16) again. Does this document show that, had Lenin lived longer, the Soviet Union would have become a more democratic state?



Theory of knowledge

History and ethics

Historians examine the past. Sometimes they make judgements about historical personalities and their actions. Is it possible for historians to do this when their contemporary circumstances are probably very different from those of the society or period they are studying? To what extent should they take into account the historical context and legacy of the past?