Lenin died in 1924, leaving a huge gap at the top of the Communist leadership. He had held the party together since 1917 and been central to determining policy. His death did not come at a good time. Now that the economy had recovered after the crises of 1921 there were many issues to resolve concerning the route to socialism, democracy and leadership in the party, and the problems of a growing bureaucracy. These issues, as well as conflict between the key personalities, led to a struggle over power that lasted for the next five years. Eventually, it was Stalin who succeeded Lenin.

Lenin died in 1924, although for most of 1923 he was incapacitated by illness. In the last years of his life, he was concerned about the state of the party, the growing bureaucracy and the power of Stalin. His relationship with Stalin deteriorated in 1922 and it seemed likely that Stalin's power would be curtailed. But Lenin died before any changes could take place and it was Stalin who took the lead at his funeral and in developing the Lenin cult.

Lenin's relationship with Stalin at the end of his life
Lenin suffered a series of strokes from late 1921 until his death in January 1924. He was able to carry on working during 1922, but a major stroke in March 1923 left him without the power of speech. In 1922, he still had considerable influence but was removed from the onerous work of running the day-to-day business of government. He had time to think about the problems of the party. He became concerned about the extent of the party bureaucracy and increasingly aware of the power that Stalin had accrued to himself. He was particularly worried about the way Stalin had abused his power by intimidating and bullying the Communists who were governing Georgia. Lenin detected a dark side to Stalin that might present a danger to the party. He mounted an investigation into the Georgian affair that confirmed his fears. He also fell out with Stalin over the issue of the Soviet republics. Stalin wanted all the republics (e.g. Ukraine, Belorussia, Georgia) to be more directly controlled by Moscow. Lenin wanted a federation of Soviet republics in which all were on a more or less equal footing. Lenin won the argument and at the end of 1922 the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was formally established.

Reference

Text Reference: pages 119-149
After the second of his strokes in December 1922, Lenin wrote a testament, a ‘Letter to the Party Congress’ to be read after his death. In it Lenin warned that Stalin had become too powerful and that he could not be trusted to use his power wisely. From this point onwards, Lenin did not trust the information with which Stalin provided him. How much Stalin knew about this is not certain, but he clearly perceived that relations with Lenin were not good and was anxious about the Georgian investigation.

Stalin’s wife worked as a secretary for Lenin, living in his house while he was ill, and she provided a conduit of information about Lenin’s contacts. Stalin found out about the increasingly warm correspondence between Trotsky and Lenin. They were working on plans to restore more democracy to the party and there seems little doubt that, if Lenin had survived a little longer, Stalin would have lost some of his key positions in the party. Stalin tried to see Lenin, but Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, would not let him visit. Stalin, in a telephone conversation, insulted her, using crude, abusive language. Lenin was upset by this and added a note to his testament which would have been very damaging to Stalin if made public.

According to the historian Robert Conquest, Lenin was more than upset: ‘He was in fact prepared for open hostilities ... One of Lenin’s secretaries told Trotsky that Lenin was now preparing a “bomb” against Stalin; and Kamenev learned from another of the secretaries that Lenin had decided “to crush Stalin politically”’ (Stalin: Breaker of Nations, 1991, p.104.) But before this could happen, Lenin had another stroke on 7 March and never recovered the power of speech.

Discussion Point:
1. Why was Lenin concerned with Stalin?
2. How did Lenin and Stalin’s relationship deteriorate?
3. What appears to have been the purpose of Lenin’s testament?
4. How did Lenin’s illness play to Stalin’s advantage?

Lenin’s funeral and the Lenin cult
The unexpected news of Lenin’s death led to widespread displays of public grief. Theatres and shops were closed for a week, while portraits of Lenin draped in red and black were displayed in windows. Over three days, three and a half million people queued for hours to file past his body lying in state. However much they hated the regime the people seemed to have a genuine affection for Lenin.

Stalin made the most of Lenin’s funeral to advance his position in the party. Just before Lenin’s death, Trotsky was ill and had set out to the south of Russia for a rest-holiday. Stalin contacted him and told him that he (Trotsky) would not be able to get back in time for the funeral. So Trotsky did not attend and it looked as though he could not be bothered to turn up. His reputation and political prestige were severely damaged by his non-attendance. Stalin, on the other hand, acted as one of the pallbearers and made a speech in which he appeared to be taking on the mantle of Leninism. Stalin hoped to transfer himself the prestige, respect and loyalty associated with Lenin. He set himself up as Lenin’s disciple, the person who would carry on Lenin’s work. He was already thinking of the looming power struggle.

Extracts from Stalin’s speech at Lenin’s funeral
There is nothing higher than the calling of the member of a Party whose founder and leader is Comrade Lenin ... Leaving us, Comrade Lenin ordered us to hold high and keep pure the great title of member of the Party. We vow to thee Comrade Lenin, that we shall honourably fulfil this commandment ... Leaving us, Comrade Lenin enjoined us to keep the unity of the Party like the apple of our eye. We vow to thee, Comrade Lenin. That we will honourably fulfil this, thy commandment ...
The cult of Leninism

The Lenin cult had begun just after the attempt on his life in 1918. Stalin gave it new momentum at Lenin's funeral. The Lenin cult was a sort of quasi-religion in which Lenin's name could be invoked like a deity or his words trotted out, much as the Bible is used to justify actions. At least, Stalin used it this way. Lenin made it clear before he died that he did not want this kind of adulation. His wife, Krupskaya, publicly asked that there should be 'no external reverence for his person'. But under pressure from Stalin, Lenin was embalmed and his tomb turned into a shrine. Lenin's brain was sliced into 30,000 segments and stored so that scientists in the future could discover the secrets of his genius.

All sorts of Lenin memorabilia, from posters to matchboxes, were produced. Statues of Lenin appeared all over the Soviet Union. Petrograd was renamed Leningrad and many streets and institutions were named after him. Trotsky was sickened by the whole business, but it was difficult to speak out against it without being accused of disloyalty and disrespect.

Discussion Point:

1. How did Stalin use Lenin's funeral to his advantage?
2. What was the cult of Lenin and why did Stalin encourage it?

How did Stalin emerge as the sole leader of Russia?

Finding a successor to Lenin was never going to be easy. He had played a unique role in holding the party together and giving it direction after the revolution. There was a real possibility that in-fighting and division could pull the Communist Party apart. For the five years after 1924, a power struggle took place in the USSR. The struggle was not just about which person should become leader, it was also about the policies the party should follow; and it was as much about keeping some people out of power. The person who emerged in 1929 as the victor of this struggle was Joseph Stalin.

Activity:

From the list below, choose the six most important qualities/characteristics that you think would have been advantageous for a leader in the USSR to have in 1924. You can add one other of your own choice not on the list.

- Good Marxist theoretician, who could take over Lenin's mantle
- Good orator
- Capacity for organisation
- Decisiveness
- Capacity for action
- Able to melt into the background
- Boring and dull
- Good at carrying our routine tasks
- Good at doing the paperwork, a good bureaucrat
- Unwavering loyalty to the party
- Clear vision of the way to socialism and prepared to take on party members who did not share this vision
- An important player in the Revolution of 1917
- Somebody everybody could accept because he did not have strong views
- Good in discussion and debate
- Popular with the party
- Able to work with other leading party figures
- Able to be ruthless
- Good writer
Joseph Dzhugashvili was born in Gori in Georgia in 1878 or 1879. He is one of the few leading revolutionaries who had a genuine working-class/peasant background. His mother was the daughter of serfs and very devout in her religious beliefs. His father was a shoemaker who worked mainly in Tiflis, some distance away. Stalin’s mother brought him up virtually on her own, working hard as a seamstress and laundress to support Joseph. They were poor and he had a hard upbringing as she beat him severely for acts of disobedience. However, he did well at school and gained a place at a seminary in Tiflis to train as a priest. But the young Joseph found Marxism rather than God. He was drawn into the underground world of the revolutionaries, writing pamphlets and attending secret meetings. He particularly admired the writings of Lenin. He soon graduated to the full-time role of revolutionary, organising strikes and possibly becoming engaged in raiding banks to fill the Bolshevik Party coffers. The name he used as his first revolutionary pseudonym was Koba.

Between 1902 and 1915, he was arrested frequently and exiled to Siberia, escaping on five occasions. He was placed in a number of prisons where he gained a reputation for toughness. He became hardened, particularly after the death of his first wife in 1907. He later took on the pseudonym ‘Stalin’ which means ‘man of steel’. In 1912, he was invited onto the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party because they were short of working-class, leading members and Stalin remained in Russia as a point of contact, while most of the others were in exile in European countries. When the February Revolution broke in 1917, he was one of the first to arrive on the scene in Petrograd.

Stalin had not played a key role in the events of 1917. He was made editor of Pravda, the party newspaper, and given a seat on the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet. Initially, he followed a pro-war line in accordance with the Soviet and other socialists. He changed his line when Lenin appeared on the scene and seems to have followed Lenin slavishly thereafter. Whilst close to the centre of the Party, he does not seem to have been given any discernible role. There is no evidence of Stalin taking charge of any of the events during the October Revolution. Sverdlov and Trotsky were the main organisers and Sverdlov did not like Stalin.

After the October Revolution, Stalin was made Commissar for Nationalities in the government. His offices were close to Lenin’s and it is likely that at this time he gained Lenin’s trust as a devoted Bolshevik operator. In the Civil War, he was sent to Tsaritsyn (later named Stalingrad) to organise food supplies and defend this very important strategic position from the Whites. It was in doing this job that he came into conflict with Trotsky: Stalin did not like having to carry out Trotsky’s orders and was removed from his military post for disobedience. On several occasions during the Civil War he had shown a tendency to disobey orders from the centre, even Lenin’s, because he wanted to do things his own way. Lenin, however, set these ‘mistakes’ aside because he had other work for Stalin.

Good luck helped Stalin in his next advancements. In March 1919, Sverdlov, who had shown himself to be a great organiser, died of Spanish flu. Lenin was left with few top administrators and looked to Stalin. He appointed Stalin head of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate, through which he became familiar with the work of different government departments. In May 1919, Lenin put him in charge of the Orgburo which controlled aspects of the party organisation. Stalin was also elected to the new Politburo, which from now on became the main organ of power. This was followed in 1922 by his appointment as the party’s first General Secretary in charge of general organisation.

Stalin’s appointment to these key positions showed how much his reputation had grown and how much trust Lenin placed in him. He gained a reputation for ‘industrious mediocrity’. Other Bolsheviks saw these jobs as part of the dull routine of party bureaucracy. They were soon to find out otherwise.

Sukhanov, the diarist of the revolution, made this comment about Stalin in 1917: ‘The Bolshevik Party ... includes a whole series of great figures and able leaders in its general staff. 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’. Stalin had his revenge. Sukhanov died in the camps in 1940.

**Activity:** As you work through your readings, compile a table like below to record information about the factors working for Stalin and against his opponents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS THAT FAVOURED STALIN</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES OF STALIN’S OPPONENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Contenders for leadership of the Communist Party

1. Leon Trotsky

Trotsky was the only member of the Communist Party who could rival Lenin in intellect and in his writings on Marxist theory. He was one of the Bolshevik's best orators, able to work crowds and bring them around to his point of view. He was particularly popular with the younger, more radical elements in the party. His contribution in the years 1917-1924 had been second, if not equal, to that of Lenin himself. He had planned the October Revolution, persuading Lenin to wait until the end of October. His organisation of the Red Army and his drive and determination had played a significant part in bringing victory in the Civil War. His position as Commissar for War gave him a strong base in the army.

Working against him were his arrogance and aloofness. He seemed dismissive of other leading Bolsheviks, sometimes treating them with disdain and lack of respect. He was short and brusque with people who seemed to be wasting his time and he never went out of his way to endear himself to his colleagues. They felt his uncompromising views might lead to splits in the party. Many old Bolsheviks regarded Trotsky as an outsider since he had only joined the Bolshevik Party in 1917 and other party member were not convinced of his loyalty to the party. This perception was wrong: he was loyal, perhaps too loyal, and accepted decisions that he did not agree with because he did not want to damage the party.

Two other important factors worked against Trotsky in the power struggle. First, he did not lie the business of political in-fighting, making deals and alliances. He preferred to work on a level where arguments were hammered out in debate or by the pen, where he was convinced of his natural superiority. This high-minded approach left him vulnerable to less scrupulous colleagues. Second, for three years from late 1925 Trotsky suffered attacks of undiagnosed fever. This sapped his strength and left him less able to deal with the continuous political attacks mounted on him by his enemies. It also meant that he was absent for crucial votes in the Politburo, although meetings were sometimes held at his bedside.
2. Gregory Zinoviev

Zinoviev was an old Bolshevik, active in the party as early as 1903. He had worked closely with Lenin before the Revolution and was with Lenin on the train that pulled into Petrograd’s Finland Station in 1917. However, Zinoviev opposed the armed uprising in October and fell out with Lenin about the construction of the new government; he favoured a socialist coalition. As a result, he was not given a major post in the Sovnarkom but he was made Party Secretary in Leningrad. This was an important position, allowing him to build up a strong power base. In 1919, he was made Chairman of the Comintern and became a full member of the Politburo in 1921. He was a good orator but not an intellectual. He was not popular, being seen by others as vain, incompetent and cowardly, making himself scarce when things got dangerous. No one seemed to like him. Victor Serge said he gave ‘an impression of flabbiness ... irresolution’ and was ‘simply a demagogue’. The historian E.H. Carr said he was ‘weak, vain, ambitious [and] only too eager to occupy the empty throne’ (The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin, 1979, p.64).

3. Lev Kamenev

Kamenev was an active Bolshevik and full-time revolutionary from 1905. He was a close collaborator with Lenin abroad from 1907 to 1917. He was a major contributor to party doctrine and had heated debates with Lenin, who regarded him as able and reliable. In 1917, he opposed Lenin’s April Theses on ideological grounds. With Zinoviev, he opposed the armed uprising in October 1917 and wanted a socialist coalition government. This lost him influence in the party and he was made Party Secretary in Moscow and later Commissar for Foreign Trade. This brought him into the Politburo and into a position to challenge for the leadership. He was a moderate, liked and well regarded. But he was much too soft to become a real leader. In his book Socialism in One Country (1958), E.H. Carr describes Kamenev as intellectually superior to Stalin and Zinoviev but ‘by far the least effective of the three ... Kamenev had neither the desire nor the capacity to lead men; he lacked any clear vision of a goal towards which he might have lead them’ (pp.161-162).

4. Nikolai Bukharin

Bukharin was one of the younger generation of Bolsheviks. Born in 1888, the son of a schoolmaster, he was nearly a decade younger than Stalin. He had joined the Bolshevik Party in 1906, was arrested in 1912, and then escaped to Germany. He had become a major figure in the party before 1917, close to Lenin. He was an important theorist who argued with Lenin about political strategy. He took a leading role on Pravda, the party newspaper, during 1917. He led the left-wing opposition to the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and between 1920 and 1921 criticised Trotsky and Lenin in the ‘trade-union’ controversy. He did not become a full member of the Politburo until 1922.

Bukharin was intellectually inquisitive. He did not accept that only Marxists could contribute to knowledge about history and politics. He loved poetry and novels and was a talented painter. He liked to enjoy life and was very popular. Even his opponents found it hard to dislike him. Lenin called him ‘the golden boy’ of the Bolshevik Party. He was not a saint and could argue his points fiercely, especially on the NEP. He did not have the skills and political cunning of Stalin. In his testament, Lenin called Bukharin ‘the biggest and most valuable theoretician in the Party’ and ‘the favourite of the whole Party’.

5. Alexei Rykov

Alexei Rykov, born in 1881 into a peasant family, became chairman of Vesenhka (Supreme Economic Council) in 1918 and later succeeded Lenin as Chairman of the Sovnarkom, having been his deputy from 1921. He was outspoken, frank and direct, not always endearing himself to his colleagues. He was a strong supporter of the NEP and opposed any return to War Communism. He was more statesmanlike than many of his colleagues but a notorious drinker: in some circles, vodka was known as Rykova.

6. Mikhail Tomsky

Mikhail Tomsky, born in 1880, was in important figure in the trade union movement, being an active member of the metalworkers’ union before 1917. In 1918, he was made Chairman of the Central Council of Trade Unions. He was one of the few genuine workers in the party leadership. He fought hard for workers to have trade union rights and was dismayed by the reduction of trade unions to an ‘appendage of the state’. He opposed Lenin in the trade union debate of 1920.

Activity: Which of the main contenders best meets the criteria you identified as key qualities required for leadership of the Revolution from 1924 onwards? Does this make you change your mind about the key characteristics/qualities Lenin’s successor should have?
What were the main issues in the leadership struggle?

When we study power struggles in history we, quite naturally, focus on the personalities involved, their strengths and weaknesses, and why one emerged stronger than others. We see the struggle as a sort of contest of wills in which the contestants possess or do not possess certain qualities that allow one of them to come out on top. Whilst this is certainly important, we also have to look at the issues that were uppermost in people’s minds when the struggle was taking place. These may be just as important in persuading people to support one candidate rather than another. This is particularly the case in the Soviet Union where there was a very real and contentious debate about government policy and the road to socialism. The key issues here were to do with leadership, industrialisation and party policy.

1. The nature of the leadership

Many party members did not want to see one person running the party and the government; they favoured ‘collective leadership’ or rule by committee. During the Civil War, the state had become highly centralised, with Lenin taking executive decisions. Now that the situation was more settled, it was thought that a collective leadership would be a more socialist way of running the state.

Party members feared that a ‘dictator’ could emerge to take control of the centralised state that had developed by 1924. This fear affected the decisions party members took between 1924 and 1926 - and the man they feared was Trotsky. As commander of the Red Army, he was in a strong position to crush opposition. His arrogant manner and conviction that he knew the direction the party should take seemed to confirm such fears. Party members were also worried about the unity of the party after Lenin’s death. They knew it was essential that the party stick together if it were to accomplish the huge task of transforming an unwilling population into good socialists. They therefore did not want a leader who might cause divisions among the different wings of the party and split it into warring factions. Again, it was Trotsky they feared.

2. The NEP and the industrialisation debate

The issue that dominated party conferences in the mid-1920s was the NEP and how the economy should be run. Everybody agreed on the need to industrialise. Industrialisation was the key to creating a large class of proletarian workers to build socialism. The question was how to do this in the most effective way. As the 1920s progressed, the NEP became increasingly unattractive to party members and they were deeply disturbed by its outward manifestations - the growth of a rich superclass, property dealing, land speculation, gambling and prostitution. These did not have any place in a socialist state. Also, after 1925 serious problems began to emerge:

- By 1925-26, industry had recovered to its pre-1913 levels. Some new impetus was needed to take it on but there was argument about where the resources to do this were going to come from.
- There was a high level of unemployment amongst workers. Wages for those in work did not keep pace with the rising prices of consumer goods, always in short supply. So many workers remained relatively poor and many could not get job - in the workers’ society!
- Food shortages started to reappear. Peasants held on to their produce because they could not buy much for their money.

It was against this backdrop that the power struggle took place. It was a question of not so much of whether party members supported the NEP - they had only accepted it as a stop-gap measure - but of when and how it should be ended. It was on this point that the two wings of the party diverged.

**THE LEFT WING**

The left wing of the party, led by Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev, wanted to end the NEP and go for rapid industrialisation. This entailed the militarisation of labour, breaking the stranglehold the peasants had on the economy and squeezing more grain out of them to pay for industrialisation.

**THE RIGHT WING**

The right wing, led by Bukharin, wanted to keep the NEP going and to encourage the peasants to become richer, so that they would spend more on consumer goods, which would, in turn, lead to the growth of manufacturing industry. They believed that conflict with the peasants might lead to economic collapse and endanger the Communist state.

**Discussion Point:** what would you advise happen with regards to the NEP and industrialisation?
2. ‘Permanent Revolution’ versus ‘Socialism in One Country’

Another important issue in the 1920s was the overall policy that the policy should develop for the future, now that the USSR was the only Communist state in the world and world revolution had not taken place. Trotsky and Stalin developed different lines on this.

**Permanent Revolution**

Trotsky believed in ‘Permanent Revolution’. He was convinced that the Communist revolution in Russia could not really succeed because the Russian working class was too small and the economy underdeveloped; it needed the support of the working class in the more industrialised countries of Europe. Trotsky felt therefore that the Russians should put energy and money into helping the working class in the more industrialised countries to stage their own revolutions. He believed that the Russians should go on fighting a ‘permanent revolution’ until a world Communist revolution had been achieved.

Trotsky also wanted to subject the USSR to a continuing revolutionary process that would move society in the direction of socialism. He believed that measures such as compulsory labour units organised along military lines and forcing peasants into collective farms might be necessary to squeeze out old attitudes and create the economic base on which a socialist society could be built.

**Socialism in One Country**

Towards the end of 1924, Stalin put forward a different policy line that he called ‘Socialism in the One Country’. He said that the Communists had to accept that the world revolution had not happened and was not likely to take place in the immediate future. He proposed that the Russians build a socialist state in the USSR without the help of people from outside. Appealing to nationalism and patriotism, he said that they were in a unique position to show the world what socialism meant. They would solve their own problems and create a workers’ society that was vastly superior to the capitalist West. They would be world leaders. It was also a very flexible doctrine because it meant that the leaders of the Communist Party could say what was the best way to achieve socialism at any particular moment in time.

**Three key issues affecting the power struggle**

1. **LEADERSHIP**
   - Collective?
   - Single person (danger of dictatorship)?

2. **NEP**
   - End now?
   - Keep going?

3. **PARTY POLICY ABOUT DIRECTION OF REVOLUTION**
   - Permanent Revolution?
   - Socialism in One Country?

**Why was the NEP so crucial to discussions in the party in the 1920s?**

1. The NEP was crucial because economic policy was at the centre of the debate about the nature of the society the Communists were trying to create. It was a passionate issue. How long should they allow rich traders and peasants effectively control the new workers’ society? When could they push forward to industrialisation?

2. Attitudes in the party towards the NEP changed during the 1920s because economic circumstances were changing. In 1924, the NEP was still delivering economic recovery, but after 1925 problems started mounting. A threat of war in 1928 provided an added spur to industrialise more quickly, as did food shortages in the cities after 1927. So, party members, who had been prepared to go along with the NEP in the mid-1920s, might have adopted a different position in the late 1920s. The positions that the contenders took on this issue during the 1920s would therefore influence the amount of support they got from different sections of the party.
How did Stalin become party leader?

Did Stalin have a long-term plan to achieve power, carefully worked out from the beginning of the 1920s, or did he take advantage of opportunities that presented themselves between 1923 and 1929? As you can see from the source below, Westwood does not think Stalin had a long-term plan. What we can be sure of is that he was determined to defend his position in the power stakes and be an important player at the top of the Communist Party, because he began building his power base in the party from 1922 onwards.

For the most part, the intrigues and manoeuvres of the contestants were motivated not so much by desire to get to the top as by the desire to keep rivals away from the top. Although Stalin seemed to win every trick, it is unlikely that he followed a long-term plan. He did not need to, he could stand back and watch his rivals dig their own graves, occasionally offering his spade to one or other of them.


It was Stalin’s position in all the key party organisations - in the Politburo, in the Orgburo and Secretariat, and as General Secretary - that gave him control of the party organisation and membership and such an enormous amount of power.

### Control of the party organisation

This meant that he could influence the selection of delegates who were sent to the annual party congress where major issues of policy were decided and the Central Committee was chosen. He could pack the congress with his supporters. This accounts for the hostile reception Trotsky received at conferences from 1924 onwards and the number of delegates who voted the way Stalin wanted. His ability to deliver votes in the congresses made him a valuable ally. This is why Zinoviev and Kamenev sought his support.

### Control of party membership

This allowed him to get rid of the more radical elements - students and soldiers - who were likely to support Trotsky. Stalin supervised the ‘Lenin Enrolment’ of 1924 and 1925, in which the party almost doubled its membership to one million. The new members tended to be young urban workers, poorly educated ex-peasants who were not interested in ideological debate and were likely to do what their local party organiser told them to do. Stalin’s practical policies based on nationalism appealed to them.
Activity:
Complete the brainstorm below outlining how the following factors contributed to Stalin’s consolidation of power over the other contenders by 1929.

Discussion Point:
Why did Stalin rather than Trotsky emerge as the leader of the USSR in 1929?
What happened to Trotsky and the other leadership contenders?

In January 1925, Trotsky lost his position as Commissar for Military Affairs; in December of the same year he lost his Politburo seat. Zinoviev was sacked as Leningrad Soviet Chairman in January 1926 and was ousted from the Politburo in July. Kamenev lost his Politburo seat at the same time and in October was removed as leader of the Comintern. In 1927, all three were expelled from the party because of their role in the United Opposition, when they campaigned for more democracy and openness in the party. Factionalism had been banned in 1921.

Kamenev and Zinoviev, demoralised, recanted their views and petitioned to be allowed to rejoin the party. They were readmitted in June 1928. Trotsky refused to recant and in 1928, on Stalin’s orders, found himself being bundled in his pyjamas into a train heading for central Asia. He was allowed to go with his secretaries and around 30 other oppositionists to Alma-ata, almost 5000km from Moscow. The following year he was deported to Turkey, where he started to write his account of the Russian Revolution and to mount what turned out to be continuous attack on Stalin over the next decade. In 1933, he moved to France and then on to Norway, but his political activities did not make him welcome in Europe and in 1937 he went to live in Mexico. He was always under threat from Stalin’s agents and in August 1940 was murdered by a hit man with an ice-pick.

Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky suffered a similar fate. Accused of ‘right deviation’, in 1929 they lost their posts. Bukharin was ousted from the Politburo and lost his posts as editor of Pravda and President of the Comintern. All three later recanted their views and were allowed to remain in the party. Bukharin made a major contribution in writing the Soviet constitution of 1936 but this did not save him from trial and executed late in the 1930s.

A summary

1. The main protagonists in the power struggle were Stalin and Trotsky. Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin were also contenders.
2. Key issues - leadership, the NEP, policies - were as important as the personalities involved.
3. It was a struggle over power rather than a struggle for power. The contenders were anxious to prevent rivals from coming to power and pursuing policies with which they did not agree.
4. On the whole, party members tended to support Stalin’s changes of policy line. They supported Socialism in One Country and his line on peasants at the end of the 1920s.
5. Stalin’s control of the party machine was a crucial factor in his success.
6. Stalin was a skilful politician who outmanoeuvred his opponents but he was also lucky.
7. Trotsky’s weaknesses and errors of judgement were important factors in his defeat.
8. All Stalin’s opponents vastly underestimated him.

Activity:
Add to your ‘master notes’ points for key people, events and ideas for the time period 1924 - 1929.