

How significant was Stalin's position as General Secretary of the Communist Party in accounting for his rise to power?

There are a number of factors that explain Stalin's rise to power. As well as his role of General Secretary, there was his natural and unerring political sixth sense which, coupled with the fatal weaknesses of his opponents and the fertile ground sown by Lenin's legacy, led to him to the top of the Communist Party.

Firstly, the role of General Secretary was very important in accounting for Stalin's success. On the face of it a dull bureaucratic post involving dreary administration, the role actually allowed Stalin vast powers over the party. It gave him a seat in the Politburo, overseeing policy, but also oversight over party members as he had access to over 26,000 personal files. His position also allowed him great patronage: those who rose within the party structure usually had Stalin to thank, and this growing loyalty to Stalin was demonstrated in the party congresses. The Fifteenth Party Congress in October 1927 saw the expulsion of the remaining leaders of the Left Opposition, notably Kamenev, affirming the previous expulsions of Trotsky and Zinoviev. Less than one per cent of the membership voted in favour of the Left Opposition, a clear indication of Stalin's stranglehold over the membership. The party had vastly increased in size due to the quarter of a million or so brought in under the Lenin Enrolment and Stalin had been able to indoctrinate many of these – often poorly educated and politically naïve – into following the nascent cult of Stalin. In addition, 'Comrade Card Index' knew the strengths and weaknesses of those around him and did not hesitate to stoop to underhand methods to get his way. Dzerzhinsky, the head of the secret police, reported to Stalin, and the faintly veiled menace Stalin possessed as the spider at the centre of the web certainly added to his power. All these factors meant that the General Secretariat was, despite appearances, very important to Stalin's political ambitions.

Secondly, it is also important not to forget, that Stalin's opponents had fatal weaknesses that led to their own downfall, allowing Stalin to rise up the ranks. There was an early failure by his rivals to rid themselves of Stalin. Underestimating him, they ignored the dying Lenin's clear contempt for his General Secretary that had grown in the last months of the old leader's life. By not publishing Lenin's Testament, his rivals allowed the myth of Stalin as a natural successor to Lenin to grow. Trotsky's failure to appear at Lenin's funeral did not help his cause; perhaps more damagingly, Trotsky's high-handed approach to the day-to-day business of politics alienated him from the rank and file of the party. He still had the support of the Red Army, but did not use this to his full advantage. Others did not help themselves by seemingly openly breaking party discipline by publishing partisan pamphlets. Bukharin too failed to see the way the wind was shifting in the party by sticking resolutely to his belief in the New Economic Policy, despite increasing unease about it among the party faithful. Others in the party had limited political ability: E.H. Carr described Zinoviev as "weak, vain" while Kamenev "lacked vision"; just as importantly, they had opposed Lenin at points during 1917, a fact that spoke against them after the 'canonisation' of Lenin by the party. All had powerbases in the party but, equally, all failed to exploit or build on these, and their failure to do so undoubtedly eased Stalin's path to power.

Thirdly, it has to be pointed out that without Lenin's legacy to the party, Stalin may well not have been in a position to vie for supreme power. It was Lenin who had established the bureaucratic nature of the party, allowing the administration the upper hand – which Stalin was able to exploit in the unglamorous role of General Secretary. Lenin's desire to vastly expand the party membership

worked in Stalin's favour too, as it was again Stalin who enrolled the new and impressionable members and giving him a position over them that other leaders in the party could not dream of. Lenin had also laid the ground by banning factionalism within the party. The more ideologically fervent members of the Politburo led themselves into traps by publicising their views when they disagreed with official party policy; Stalin was able to use this ban to show how his opponents were betraying the memory of Lenin, and betraying the Communist Party itself. Without this groundwork having been done, Stalin's task of seizing power would certainly have been more difficult.

Finally, Stalin's great political cunning and skill was a key factor allowing him to rise to power. It was the case that other secretaries before him had been in a similar position in the party but had no serious claims to power, acting in a merely technical manner. Stalin was different, however. On the surface he was politically neutral – the 'grey blur' in Sukhanov's famous description. It was this lack of political controversy that gained him steady ground and, more importantly, meant that he did not alienate either wing of the party and was able to shift from Left to Right. This ability to switch sides, seemingly without negative consequences, was key. Able first to outmanoeuvre Trotsky by splitting the Left faction and Trotsky's ideological bedfellows, Kamenev and Zinoviev, Stalin then managed to switch positions to sideline his erstwhile allies by joining Bukharin and the Right before ditching him too. Stalin also had a knack of acquiring positions that no one else seemed to want to do: People's Commissar for Nationalities from 1917, liaison officer between the Politburo and the Orgburo, Head of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate (both from 1919) gave him extensive powers: he controlled or had a say in policy, but also had extensive powers - particularly in the latter role - over the party as a whole. Despite this, he hid his ambition well, offering to resign on several occasions during the 1920s but had been refused. He had made himself out to both indispensable and unthreatening to his rivals, a useful combination. He seemed to rise above politics, riding high on the veneration of the dead Lenin's memory by linking himself to the old leader in works such as *The Foundations of Leninism* and denouncing others as factionalists. This was therefore a vital element to Stalin's rise to power.

Overall, these factors combined to give Stalin the edge over all those within the party who wanted the leadership. Lenin's legacy had set the stage for Stalin, placing Stalin in the administrative centre of a bureaucracy-bound party and by handing him thousands of new party members over whom he had power and patronage. The failure of others to fully exploit Lenin's legacy in the same way shows that Stalin's rivals were not as politically astute as the man from Georgia, who had a natural political flair and a cunning that enabled him to exploit his rivals, turn them against each other, and stab them in the back when they had been weakened. Stalin's own natural political skill was also very important, allowing him to take full advantage of the position he held at Lenin's death. At the heart of it, however, Stalin's position as General Secretary gave him the power and the means to achieve all of this. While Lenin had given him his position, Lenin had not handed Stalin the keys of power: there were those in the party in important and high-profile positions with excellent chances of making it to the top, able to use the legacy left by Lenin in the same way as Stalin did so effectively. Stalin's power base was the rank and file of the party, a luxury afforded him by virtue of the General Secretariat. Without this, his rivals would not have seen him as a useful ally; without this, he would not have been able to turn against them, confident that the party at large would support him. Therefore Stalin's position as General Secretary was in fact highly significant in explaining his rise to power by the late 1920s.