

## D Why did Stalin become party leader?

### ACTIVITY

1 You will already have developed your own ideas about why Stalin emerged as the leader of Soviet Russia by 1929. The writers of Sources 10.3–10.10 indicate some of the key reasons why they think Stalin won the power struggle and whether this was to do with his skills or the weaknesses of his opponents. Read the sources carefully. Decide which column of the table below they would fit into.

Importance of control of party organisation	Policies	Stalin's personal characteristics and political skills	Weaknesses of opponents, especially Trotsky	Luck

- 2 How do these sources suggest that perceptions of Stalin changed considerably between 1924 and 1928?
- 3 What does this tell us about how Stalin conducted his campaign for the leadership?
- 4 Add new information from these sources to the table of factors which helped Stalin and worked against his opponents (page 182).

**SOURCE 10.3** G. Hosking, *A History of the Soviet Union*, 1985, p. 140

*To his comrades in the Party leadership he [Stalin] was known, rather condescendingly, as 'Comrade Card-Index' (Tovarishch Kartotekov): they were content to leave him to assemble and classify the personnel files, not yet realising what power was accumulating therein. Most of them, being well read in the history of past revolutions, were obsessed by a very different danger: that of finding the revolutions hijacked by another Bonaparte.*

*[Note: Bolsheviks were very knowledgeable about the French Revolution and expected, after the initial period of violent revolution, that a Napoleon Bonaparte figure would emerge as a dictator in Russia.]*

**SOURCE 10.4** I. Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky 1921–29*, 1959, p. 93

*The truth is that Trotsky refrained from attacking Stalin because he felt secure. No contemporary, and he least of all, saw in the Stalin of 1923 the menacing and towering figure he was to become. It seemed to Trotsky almost a bad joke that Stalin, the wilful and sly but shabby and inarticulate man in the background, should be his rival.*

**SOURCE 10.5** E. H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, 1958, p. 151

*[Trotsky] ... the great intellectual, the great administrator, the great orator lacked one quality essential – at any rate in the conditions of the Russian Revolution – to the great political leader. Trotsky could fire masses of men to acclaim and follow him. But he had no talent for leadership among equals. He could not establish his authority among colleagues by the modest arts of persuasion or by sympathetic attention to the views of men of lesser intellectual calibre than himself.*

**SOURCE 10.6** Bukharin, at a secret meeting with Kamenev in July 1928

*Stalin is a Genghis Khan, an unscrupulous intriguer, who sacrifices everything else to the preservation of power ... He changes his theories according to whom he needs to get rid of next.*

**SOURCE 10.7** I. Deutscher, *Stalin*, rev. edn, 1966, p. 277

*In the Politburo, when matters of high policy were under debate, he [Stalin] never seemed to impose his views on his colleagues. He carefully followed the course of debate to see what way the wind was blowing and invariably voted with the majority, unless he had assured his majority beforehand. He was therefore always agreeable to the majority. To Party audiences he appeared as a man without personal grudge and rancour, as a detached Leninist, a guardian of the doctrine who criticised others only for the sake of the cause.*

**SOURCE 10.8** C. Ward, *Stalin's Russia*, 1993, pp. 35–36

*All Bolshevik leaders were trying to find their feet in an unfamiliar and unanticipated world, and the doctrine of socialism in one country at least had the merit of describing things as they really were . . . The theory evoked a sympathetic response from two groups: the new sub-elites advanced by the crises of the immediate post-evolutionary years and workers sickened by the manifold injustices and inequalities of the NEP. The latter were men and women indifferent to factional squabbles and impatient for socialist reconstruction; the former were people . . . for whom the Revolution was primarily a Russian achievement – Soviet patriotism sat easily with the enjoyment of the fruits of offices. A Stalinist constituency was in the process of formation and Stalin's 'left turn' (rapid industrialisation and collectivisation) brought most of them round to his way of thinking.*

**SOURCE 10.9** R. Conquest, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations*, 1991, pp. 129–30

*In 1923 Stalin had been on the point of political ruin. In 1924 he was one among equals, but without any outright supporters in the full membership of the Politburo. Six years later he would be in unchallenged power . . . In six years Stalin outmanoeuvred a series of opponents; first in alliance with the rest of his colleagues, he opposed and demoted Trotsky. Then in alliance with the Bukharin–Rykov 'Right' he defeated the Zinoviev–Kamenev 'Left' bloc . . . and finally he and his own following attacked their hitherto allies, the 'Rightists'.*

**SOURCE 10.10** M. McCauley, *Russia 1917–41*, 1997, p. 78

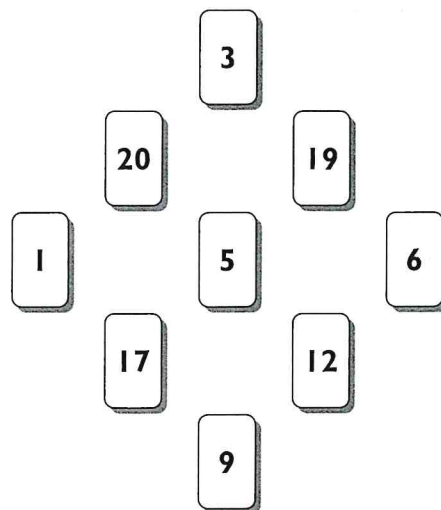
*Stalin had luck on his side. Had Lenin not died Stalin would probably have been sent to the provinces to work for the Party. Dzerzhinsky, the head of the Cheka, from its inception to his death in 1926, was never one of Stalin's fans. His death allowed Stalin to infiltrate his supporters into the political police and eventually use them against his opponents.*

**ACTIVITY**

Write an essay entitled: Why did Stalin rather than Trotsky emerge as the leader of the USSR in 1929?

You will have collected a lot of information to help you to answer this question as part of the Focus Route activity on page 182 but how are you going to structure your essay and deploy the information? The twenty-one cards on page 194 can help you to do this. Five of the cards are paragraph headings. They represent the **main points** which directly answer the essay question. The other cards represent points which **support** the main points.

- Using your own copy of the cards and working in groups of three or four, find the **main points** and arrange them in a row. Then find the **supporting points** that go with each main point and put them in the correct column. The columns are not evenly balanced. Some main points have three cards, others have only two.
- But how much weight should you give to each of the different explanations – which are the most important reasons? Try this: choose **nine** cards that you think are the most important in answering this question. Arrange them in the shape of a diamond like the one shown here. Put the one you think is the most important at the top, the next two most important on the second line and so on. (N.B. We have **not** shown a correct answer in the example.)



- Discuss the cards you chose and the order you put them in with other members of the class. Argue the case for your ordering compared with theirs.
- Now write your essay. Don't just use the information given on the cards. Use the rest of the information in this chapter to develop your points fully. You don't have to stick to our paragraph headings. The important thing is that you decide what your main points are to answer the question and how you are going to explain/support these main points.

<p><b>1</b></p> <p>Stalin had control of the party machine through his key positions in the Politburo and Orgburo and as General Secretary.</p>	<p><b>2</b></p> <p>Stalin stayed in the background pretending to be a moderate peacemaker. So no one realised he was a serious power player. He outmanoeuvred his opponents, playing them off against each other.</p>	<p><b>3</b></p> <p>Luck favoured Stalin rather than Trotsky.</p>	<p><b>4</b></p> <p>Socialism in One Country was more appealing to most party members than Permanent Revolution. It gave Russians a special historic role.</p>
<p><b>5</b></p> <p>Stalin made full use of Lenin's funeral to advance his position. He tricked Trotsky into not attending the funeral. He took on the mantle of Leninism to transfer Lenin's prestige to himself.</p>	<p><b>6</b></p> <p>Stalin's personal characteristics and qualities helped him become leader of the party.</p>	<p><b>7</b></p> <p>Stalin was able to appoint his own supporters to key positions in the party. He controlled the membership of the party, using his power to expel members likely to support Trotsky and bring in new members likely to support him.</p>	<p><b>8</b></p> <p>Stalin was politically very skilful and cunning.</p>
<p><b>9</b></p> <p>Stalin was perceived as dull and mediocre – the 'grey blur'. So no one saw him as a threat until it was too late. He was tough and ruthless. He was determined to protect his power base and make sure that he was not ousted.</p>	<p><b>10</b></p> <p>Trotsky himself was responsible for his own downfall. He had weaknesses that made him unfit for the power struggle.</p>	<p><b>11</b></p> <p>Lenin and Sverdlov died at the right time for Stalin.</p>	<p><b>12</b></p> <p>Trotsky had only joined the Bolsheviks in August 1917 and was not seen as a loyal member of the party. Many Bolsheviks did not trust him. They thought he might try to become a dictator.</p>
<p><b>13</b></p> <p>Stalin's different positions on the NEP during the mid to late 1920s and his decision to go for rapid industrialisation at the end of the 1920s were supported by the majority of party members.</p>	<p><b>14</b></p> <p>Less high-minded, more down to earth and practical than other leading Bolsheviks, Stalin was ideally suited to managing the bureaucratic and centralised party that had developed.</p>	<p><b>15</b></p> <p>Trotsky was too high-minded and arrogant, dismissive of his colleagues. He was respected but did not engender affection or personal loyalty. He was seen as the person most likely to cause splits in the party.</p>	<p><b>16</b></p> <p>Stalin's control of appointments and the membership made him a useful ally. Other contenders wanted him on their side because he could deliver votes in the congresses.</p>
<p><b>17</b></p> <p>Trotsky did not go out of his way to develop or build up his power base in the party and allowed Stalin to erode the one he already had. Like the other contenders, he underestimated Stalin and was outmanoeuvred by him.</p>	<p><b>18</b></p> <p>Stalin was a very loyal party member who was one of the few leaders with proletarian roots. It seemed he would not cause splits in the party.</p>	<p><b>19</b></p> <p>Stalin adopted policies that were broadly approved by the majority of the Communist Party. He was responsive to the mood of the times.</p>	<p><b>20</b></p> <p>Trotsky did not like getting involved in the 'drudgery of politics'. He was no good at political intrigue, making alliances and trade-offs.</p>
			<p><b>21</b></p> <p>It was lucky for Stalin that Lenin's testament was not read out and that Trotsky was ill for most of the power struggle.</p>

## 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 50 other oppositionists to Alma-ata, almost 5000 km 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 a 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 execution later in the 1930s (see page 247).

### KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 10

#### How did Stalin emerge as the sole leader of Russia?

- 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 the 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.