

## C How did Stalin become party leader?

### FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Make notes on the way Stalin outmanoeuvred his opponents.
- 2 Add more details to your table of factors which helped Stalin and worked against his opponents, especially Trotsky.

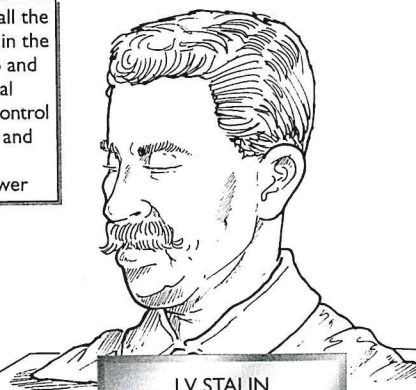
Did Stalin have a long-term plan to achieve power, carefully worked out from the beginning of the 1920s, or did he take advantage of opportunities that presented themselves between 1923 and 1929? As you can see from Source 10.2, Westwood does not think Stalin had a long-term plan. What we can be sure 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.

**SOURCE 10.2** J. N. Westwood, *Endurance and Endeavour*, 1973, p. 287

*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.*

### 10C How did Stalin build up his power base?

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



#### Party Secretary

This position gave him control, to some extent, of the business of the Politburo. For example, drawing up agendas and papers for the Politburo meetings gave him control over what was discussed and what information other members received.

#### Positions in Orgburo and the Secretariat

These gave him control of appointments to positions of responsibility in the party structure. He could put his supporters in key positions. In particular, the party secretaries from regional to local party level were increasingly Stalin's men: party secretaries of regions like the Ukraine were very powerful and at lower levels could virtually decide how party members voted.

#### Control of the party organisation

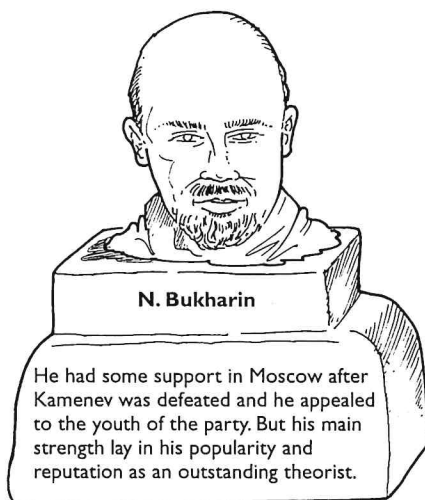
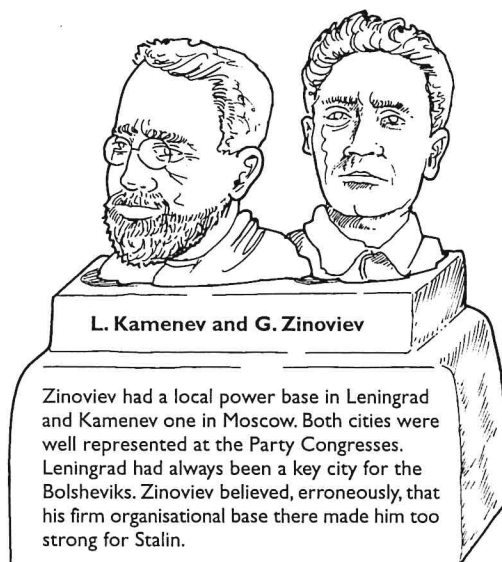
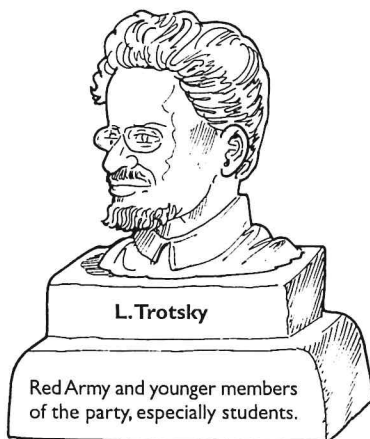
This meant that he could influence the selection of delegates who were sent to the annual party congress where major issues of policy were decided and the Central Committee was chosen. He could pack the congress with his supporters. This accounts for the hostile reception Trotsky received at conferences 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.

## ■ 10D Power bases of other contenders

The other contenders had power bases but did not build up their support in the way Stalin did; they all made the mistake of underestimating Stalin.



When studying how someone like Stalin came to power, there is a tendency to see the process as inevitable. We identify certain factors that helped the person to achieve power – for example, aspects of his character and personality, or weaknesses in, or wrong moves by, his opponents – and these seem to suggest that the end result was a foregone conclusion. But this is only with the benefit of hindsight. There were several points at which Stalin's ambitions might have been blocked. His position was not completely secure in 1929 and it was only by about 1937 that his position was virtually unassailable.

### ACTIVITY

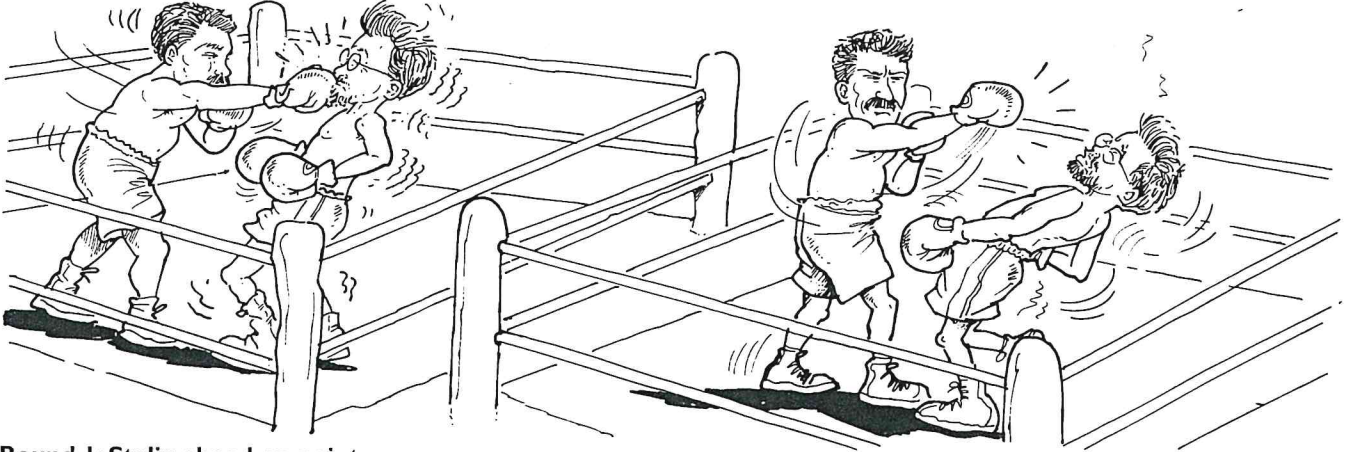
Can you identify any points at which Stalin's career might have been stopped:

- a) when Lenin was alive
- b) during the power struggle?

## 10E The power struggle

### BEFORE THE BOUT BEGINS

- The positions Stalin held in the party administration – General Secretary from 1922, and member of the Orgburo and Secretariat – gave him enormous power over the policy and personnel of the party. This was the case even before Lenin died, but his rivals did not realise it and underestimated him.
- The ban on factions in 1921 was potentially a devastating weapon in the hands of the man who could control votes at party congresses.



### Round 1: Stalin ahead on points

Stalin struck two significant blows at Lenin's funeral:

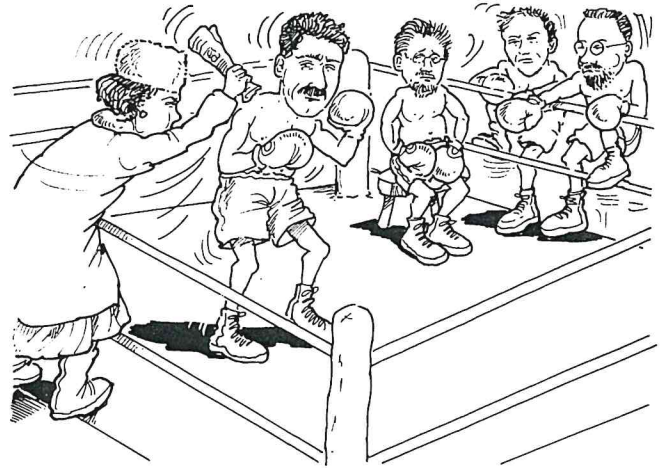
- He tricked Trotsky into not turning up for the funeral, severely damaging Trotsky's reputation and political prestige
- He made the most of the funeral, setting himself up as Lenin's disciple, the person who would carry on Lenin's work

### Round 2: Stalin dodges a knock-out blow

Krupskaya gave Lenin's secret testament to the Central Committee in May 1924 just before the Thirteenth Party Congress. If read out to the congress, it would have spelt the end of Stalin's career. But Zinoviev and Kamenev urged that it should not become general knowledge, probably because

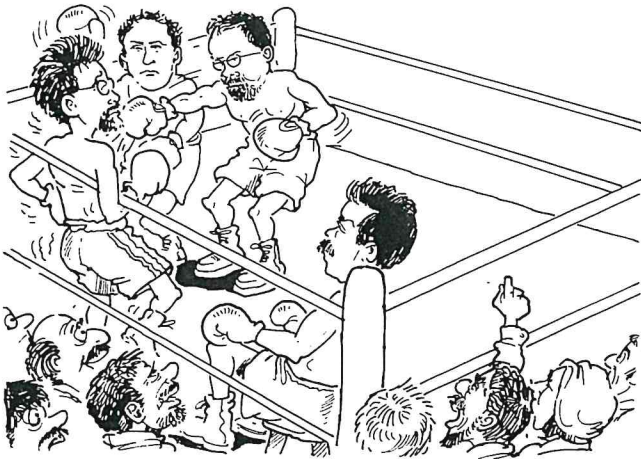
- it was not very flattering about them because of their opposition to Lenin in 1917; this was not something they wanted to bring to the congress's attention when they hoped to become its leading lights
- they thought that Stalin presented no real threat to them or the party and they wanted Stalin's help in defeating Trotsky
- they thought the testament might help Trotsky.

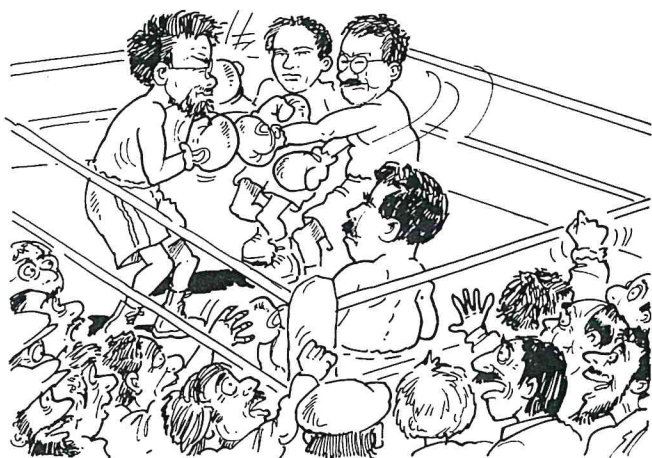
Trotsky remained silent, unwilling to become involved. This was a major mistake on his part and was to cost him dearly later.



### Round 3: Trotsky on the ropes

The Thirteenth Congress in 1924 saw hostilities out in the open. Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin, now effectively a triumvirate leading the party, presented party policy at the congress. Trotsky criticised the party for becoming bureaucratic and less democratic. Despite making brilliant speeches, Trotsky was easily defeated in the votes because the congress was packed with 'well-instructed Stalinist delegates' as well as the powerful blocs controlled by Zinoviev and Kamenev. Trotsky could have appealed to supporters inside and outside the party, but he had approved the 'ban on factions' in 1921 and was unwilling to cause splits in the party.

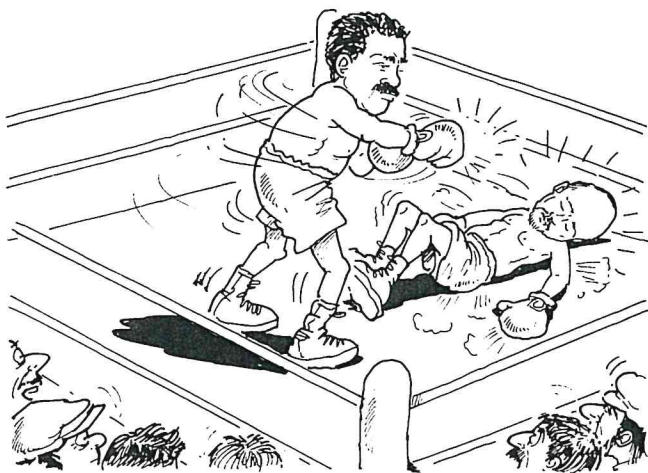




#### Round 5: Knockout blow for the left

In 1925, Stalin's policy of 'Socialism in One Country' proved very popular with party members, attracting the right wing of the party because it seemed to fit in with the NEP – their own route to socialism. A new alliance emerged between Stalin in the centre of the party and Bukharin on the right, supporting NEP and co-operation with the peasants. At the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1925, Zinoviev and Kamenev attacked Stalin, calling for a vote of no confidence in him, the ending of the NEP and a tough line against the peasants. But Stalin's control of the party machine was now so complete that they gave him little trouble. They lost every vote because Stalin had control of the delegates.

In 1926, they joined Trotsky, their old enemy, to form a 'United Opposition' and made a direct appeal to the party masses and the workers, trying to organise demonstrations in Moscow. This was a mistake because they could now be accused of 'factionalism'. As a result, all three lost their positions of power (see page 195) and in 1927 were expelled from the party.



#### The winner

In December 1929, Stalin celebrated his fiftieth birthday. He was now the undisputed leader of the USSR.

#### Round 4: The left slugs it out

In 1924, Zinoviev and Kamenev mounted a vicious campaign against Trotsky, questioning his loyalty and raising his opposition to Lenin before 1917. Trotsky retaliated by attacking them in *Lessons of October*, in which he criticised their unwillingness to back Lenin in the 1917 revolution. Stalin stayed in the background, happy to see the left wing tearing itself apart while he continued to build his power base. He seemed to be the moderate peacemaker, anxious to maintain party unity. Zinoviev and Kamenev, still frightened of Trotsky, allowed Stalin to bring more of his supporters into key positions in the party organisation, forming the majorities on committees and at conferences.



#### Round 6: Knockout blow for the right

In 1928, Stalin turned against the NEP and attacked the right wing of the party. He now advocated rapid industrialisation and the use of force to make the peasants co-operate – the very policies of the left that he had just smashed! Bukharin mounted a strong defence of the NEP but at the congress of 1929 found himself outvoted by Stalin's supporters, who were joined by those on the left who supported the anti-NEP line. Bukharin and the other right-wing leaders, Rykov and Tomsky, were removed from the Politburo and other party bodies (Rykov had been Premier since Lenin's death and Bukharin had been head of the Comintern).

