

## A Who were the contenders?

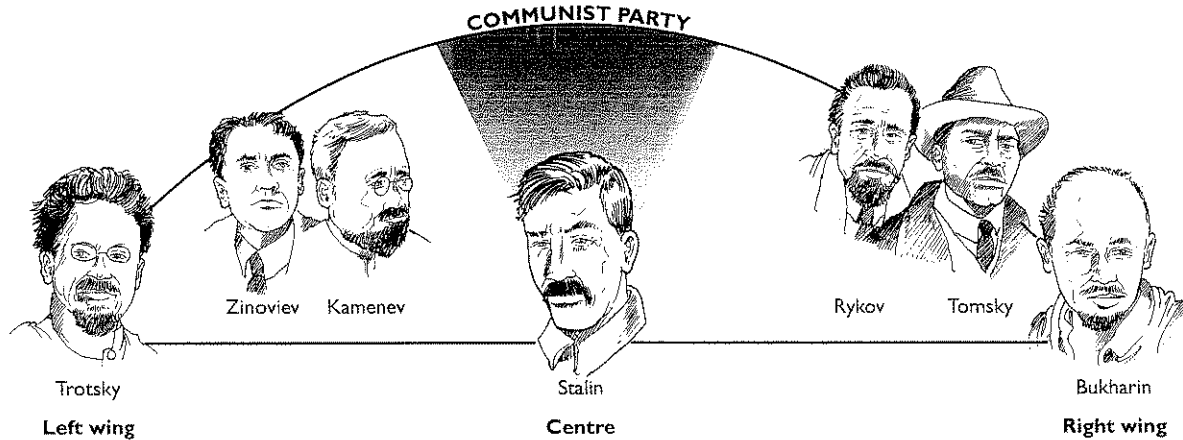
### FOCUS ROUTE

Make brief notes on each of the leadership contenders, identifying their strengths and weaknesses as potential leaders.

In retrospect, it is clear that the contest for the leadership was really between Trotsky and Stalin. But this was not apparent at the time. At first, Stalin was regarded as a minor player, with the chief contenders being Trotsky on the one hand and Zinoviev and Kamenev on the other. Also, in the early stages the power struggle was more about stopping others getting to the top rather than trying to come out on top oneself.

It is useful to place the contenders for party leadership in terms of their political position in the party of 1924. There was a clear split between the radical left wing led by Trotsky and the right wing headed by Bukharin. The majority of party members lay somewhere in between. Stalin fell into this group. The men shown in Chart 10A were in the Politburo elected in June 1924.

### 10A Contenders for leadership of the Communist Party



### Contenders

#### 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 1917-24 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 members 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 like 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 an 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.

**Joseph Stalin**

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 1913, 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 new 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 renamed 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.

**FOCUS ROUTE**

As you work through this chapter, compile a table like the one below to record information about the factors working for Stalin and against his opponents. You will be able to use this in the essay at the end of the chapter.

Factors that favoured Stalin	Weaknesses of Stalin's opponents

**Gregory Zinoviev**

Zinoviev was an old Bolshevik, active in the party as early as 1905. 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 (see page 328) 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, page 64).

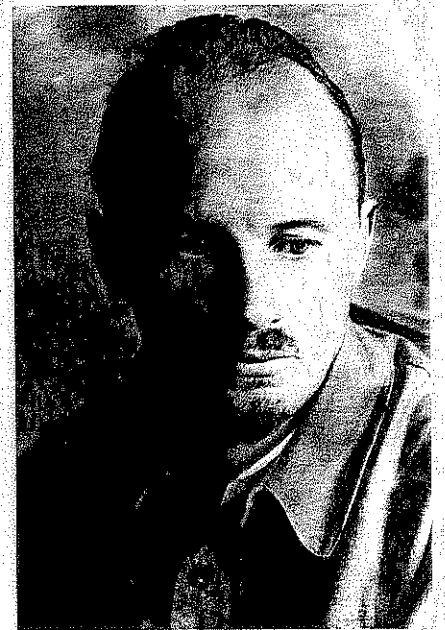
**Lev Kamenev**

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 but 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 led them' (pages 161, 162).

**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 (see page 151). 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'. But Lenin added, 'his theoretical views can only with the greatest doubt be regarded as fully Marxist'.





### Alexei Rykov

Alexei Rykov, born in 1881 into a peasant family, became chairman of Vesentka (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.

### ACTIVITY

#### Stage 2

You have now read about the main contenders for the leadership of the Communist state. Which of them best meets the criteria that you drew up in Stage 1 of this Activity on page 181? Do you now wish to change your mind about the key characteristics/qualities the new leader should have?

### Mikhail Tomsky

Mikhail Tomsky, born in 1880, was an 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.



## **B** 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.

### TROTSKY – A DICTATOR?

Trotsky had no intention of becoming a dictator and had always been aware of the tendency for this to happen after a revolution. In 1904, he had warned that if a small party seized power, then: 'The organisation of the Party takes the place of the Party itself; the Central Committee takes the place of the organisation; and finally the dictator takes the place of the Central Committee.' He did not attempt to use the Red Army to secure his position. He was to argue for more democracy and openness in the party in the mid-1920s. However, some commentators have suggested that, whatever he said, he was dictatorial in style and may have acted accordingly if he had become leader.

### I 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 jobs – 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 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 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, 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.

(You can find out more about this debate and how it was resolved in Chapter 11.)

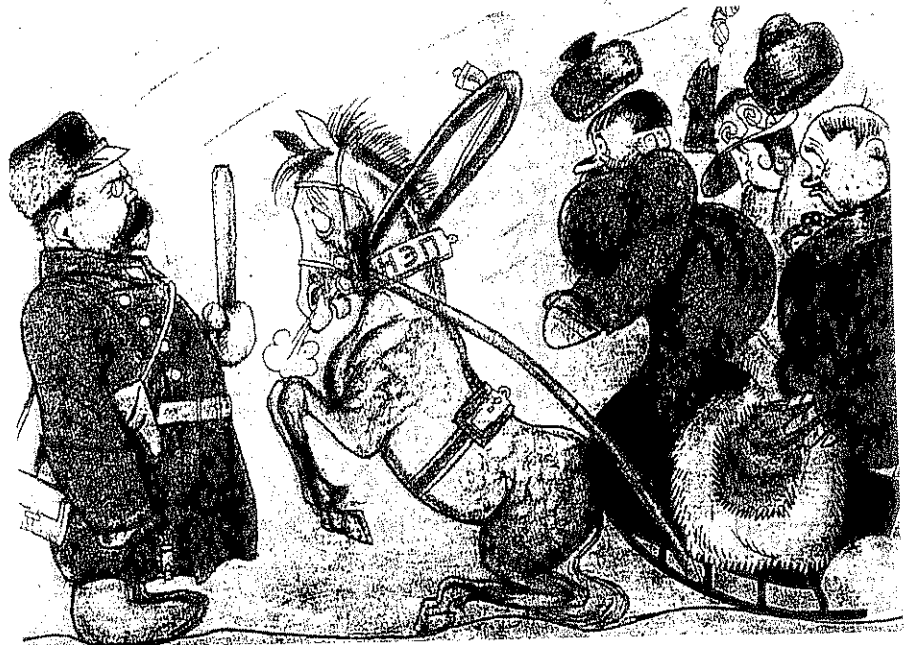
### FOCUS SOURCE

- 1 Make notes summarising the key issues facing the party in the 1920s.
- 2 Which contender would be most hindered by the leadership issue?
- 3 How do you think the divisive NEP debate would affect the chances of particular contenders?
- 4 Which policy – 'Permanent Revolution' or 'Socialism in One Country' – do you think would most appeal to party members after so many years of conflict? Which contender would this help most?
- 5 Add any relevant information to the table you started on page 182.

### ACTIVITY

Study Source 10.1.

- 1 What does the horse represent?
- 2 Who are the people on the sledge?
- 3 Why do you think the artist used the image of a horse and sledge?
- 4 How does this cartoon reveal the stance of Kamenev and the Left towards the NEP?



**SOURCE 10.1** A 1924 cartoon showing Kamenev's stance on the NEP. The horse has the letters NEP on its collar

■ Learning trouble spot

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

- a) 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 to control the new workers' society? When could they push forward to industrialisation?
- b) 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.

**3 'Permanent Revolution' versus 'Socialism in One Country'**

Another important issue in the 1920s was the overall policy that the party 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 other 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 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 optimistic as well as patriotic. Stalin argued that Permanent Revolution was defeatist and showed that Trotsky did not believe in Russia, its people and its mission. 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.

**ACTIVITY**

**Stage 3**

Having looked at the issues which divided the party, delete from the list you produced for the Activity on page 181 any characteristics/qualities that you think would **not** be useful in a new leader. Add new ones (or ones from the original list) that you now think would be helpful. In small groups, discuss your final lists and then compare them with other groups to see if you have reached any consensus.

■ 10B Summary: Three key issues affecting the power struggle

