

Candidate 1 evidence

To what extent can Stalin's rise to power be ascribed to opportunism?

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Introduction

In 1924, Lenin's death left a gaping hole in the structure of the Communist Party. His role in the leadership of the party cannot be understated. His cult status proves this importance. It was, in many historians and party members' opinion, surprising that Stalin would assume this role. Sukhanov (a Menshevik known as the 'diarist of the revolution') described Stalin as a 'grey blur' due to his mediocrity. Thus, we must consider how this unlikely figure sidestepped his opponents and gained control of the party and therefore, the country. The Georgian would be priest, who started his career in the Bolshevik party as a bank robber, did not appear to be the type of man to lead a country. Opportunism played an important role in his rise to power as he exploited his opponents' mistakes and weaknesses and profited from sheer luck. However, several other contributing factors would suggest opportunism played a lesser role. His power base, for example, accumulated over a long career in the Bolshevik party, coupled with his natural charisma made him a valuable ally. This, together with his political ideology which proved far more popular among the other communists than his opponents', demonstrates that it was his political ability and personal attributes which led to his success as opposed to good fortune. All these factors contributed to the turn of events which led to Stalin's ascension which in turn proved to be a moment of great importance in the history of Russia.

To what extent did Stalin's role within the party contribute to him gaining control?

Stalin, despite being wholly underestimated by his opponents, had a massive power base within the party, allowing him to gain support and outmanoeuvre his opponents. Ward highlights "He was the only leader who was a member of the Politburo, Orgburo, Secretariat and Central Committee,"¹ giving him insight into the workings of each department of the party. Even Lenin noted in his Testament that Stalin had accumulated enormous power². As Party Secretary, he had a major input to the drafting of the Politburo agendas and drafted the minutes of the meetings. This ensured he controlled not only what was discussed at the meetings, but also what information was disseminated to the rest of the Party. Trotsky stated to Stalin at a party meeting, "you will have the final word, as always,"³ referring to this power. Stalin's power over communication from the Politburo would have been significant as it was the only method ordinary party members and the population had to judge the contenders for power. He also had control of party organisation allowing him to decide who would be sent to the annual Party Congress where important issues of policy were decided, allowing him to fill these meetings with his supporters. The significance of this can be seen after Lenin's death, when despite Trotsky's superior oratory skills, he was heckled at party events by the attendees who were mostly Stalin's supporters and voted as he dictated. Despite the fact these positions were crucial to Stalin in hindsight, at the time they were considered insignificant. Being administrative, they were not considered important; however in the new, relatively stable Russia, it was these positions that mattered. Carr argues that Stalin's rise to power "was a triumph, not of reason, but of organisation."⁴ At the party conferences and Central Committee meetings Stalin was able to use his position in a way no opponent could have foreseen, orchestrating who attended and therefore the results of any votes. Hosking notes he was known as 'Comrade Card-index'⁵ demonstrating that his opponents underestimated the importance of his administrative role and therefore never considered him a threat. As Stalin's rise to power can be associated with his own administrative skills we can argue that Stalin created

¹C. Ward, "Stalin's Russia", Hodder Headline group, 1999, pg9

²S. Fitzpatrick, "The Russian Revolution, Oxford university press, 2008, pg 108

³S. Fitzpatrick, "On Stalin's Team", Princeton University press, 2015, pg37

⁴E.H. Carr, socialism in one country, the Macmillan company, 1958

⁵G. Hosking, "A history of the Soviet Union", 1985, pg140

his own success without relying on circumstance. However considering that it was largely down to his opponents misjudging the importance of these roles, his success was at least to an extent taking advantage of his opponent's mistakes and therefore opportunistic.

His positions in the Orgburo and the Secretariat were crucial to his success as they allowed him to appoint his own supporters into positions of power within the party. These new high ranking 'Stalinists' in the party were able to influence the views of ordinary members and ensure they would vote in Stalin's favour. During the 'Lenin Enrolments' of 1924 and 1925, the bulk of those recruited were poor, uneducated urban workers and peasants who would act as 'yes men', doing as they were told by the local leader who preached Stalin's ideology. With membership doubling to nearly a million, Stalin had a compliant support base which became vital to the success of his theory 'Socialism in One Country' and the five year plans. This is evidence of his political cunning, proving he created his own success and was not merely reliant on opportune circumstances. However a significant factor which allowed Stalin to form his powerbase was that Zinoviev and Kamenev let him put his supporters into key positions in an attempt to prevent Trotsky from doing the same. As Stalin was taking advantage of Zinoviev and Kamenev's mistake we can see opportunism did play a role in the accumulation of his powerbase. It can be argued however that Stalin's pre-existing powerbase was what allowed him to trick Zinoviev and Kamenev into supporting him as opposed to their own poor judgment. As Stalin had a wide support base he was viewed as a valuable ally in the leadership struggle. Lynch claims that Zinoviev and Kamenev recruited Stalin in their attack on Trotsky primarily because of his following which would gain them votes⁶. This allowed Stalin to bring even more supporters in to party committees which created a vital part of his support base. Zinoviev and Kamenev were not alone in being fooled into trusting Stalin thanks to his apparent usefulness, Bukharin helped Stalin remove the Left contenders from their positions in the party. In 1927 Bukharin and Stalin were able to expel Zinoviev and Kamenev from the party, crushing the 'united opposition'. Bukharin needed Stalin's influence in the party to protect his treasured NEP, Stalin was fortunate that his opponents were keen to

⁶C.Ward, "Stalin's Russia", 2ed, Hodder & Stoughton, 1993, pg 35

utilise his immense powerbase as it allowed him to gain their trust, and then outmanoeuvre them. This fortune supports the role of opportunism in his rise to power.

How important was Stalin's personality and ideology in him becoming the leader of the Soviet Union?

Although Stalin's personal strengths were pivotal in his gaining control, surprisingly none of the other leaders saw him as being a major threat. He was not an intellectual like Bukharin, nor from an industrial background similar to Tomsky and he lacked all qualities which would be expected of a leader⁷. He was however cunning, allowing him to outmanoeuvre his opponents. Westwood claims, "He could stand back and watch them dig their own graves"⁸; evidenced as he sat back and watched Zinoviev and Kamenev destroy Trotsky's reputation, questioning his loyalty, and Trotsky's counter offensive against them in his article 'Lessons of October'. Zinoviev in particular liked to remind the party of Trotsky's mistakes and his arguments with Lenin in the past. Stalin was in an opportune position to advance his cause as his opponent's weaknesses were revealed and he seized the chance to exploit these weaknesses. Nevertheless Stalin still required to use his superior political ability to outmanoeuvre his opponents. One such technique was to play on his neutrality and his opponents' mistake of underestimating him. Gordon argues, "(Stalin) used the 'Grey blur' as a smoke screen"⁹. Stalin assumed the appearance of a moderate peacekeeper to gain the trust of the other party members. It shows as Zinoviev and Kamenev, still desperate to prevent Trotsky from gaining power, allowed Stalin to assign more supporters to party positions. This proves that Stalin was deliberately using his anonymity to build his powerbase and defeat his opponents suggesting it was Stalin's cunning and not opportunism which allowed him to outmanoeuvre them.

Conquest follows this belief that Stalin was simply a better politician allowing him to outmanoeuvre his opponents and gain control¹⁰. For example when Stalin outmanoeuvred Trotsky by tricking him into not attending Lenin's funeral. Although this trickery cannot be confirmed as Stalin's personal doing, Service claims that it was certainly consistent with his nature saying "Stalin was indeed capable of such underhandedness"¹¹. Trotsky's absence severely damaged his reputation. Lynch states "appearances mattered,

⁷ S. Fitzpatrick, "The Russian Revolution", Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, pg 109

⁸ J.N. Westwood, *Endurance and Endeavour*, 1973, pg 287

⁹ R. Gordon, "Modern History Review", Hodder education, 1992

¹⁰ R. Conquest, "Breaker of Nations", 1991, pg129-30

¹¹ R. Service, "Trotsky", Bleknop press, 2011, pg312.

and the sight of Stalin as leading mourner suggested a continuity.”¹² Stalin used Lenin’s funeral to present himself as the natural heir of Lenin. Overall his ability to politically out play Trotsky shows that Stalin did not find himself in his opportune position simply through chance but through political prowess. However Trotsky disputed the importance of the funeral, believing Stalin’s “I vow to thee” speech had little impact at the time and dismissed the widely held belief that his absence was the reason for his demise claiming it “can hardly be taken seriously”¹³ Thatcher would argue that Trotsky’s absence was not due to Stalin at all but a conscious decision by Trotsky to avoid Stalin and the rest of the Politburo from whom he had already been alienated¹⁴. If this is correct, Trotsky can be seen to have poor judgment and this would suggest circumstance and opportunism on Stalin’s part was far more important than Stalin’s own cunning in his rise to power. Trotsky was far closer to Lenin than Stalin was in Lenin’s later life as shown by the negativity towards Stalin that Lenin exudes in his Testament, however Trotsky was not as focused on becoming the Soviet Union’s leader and refused to fully commit to advancing his own position at Lenin’s grave side. Stalin suffered from no such weakness.

Stalin was not a brilliant orator, his thick Georgian accent kept him from making passionate speeches similar to those of Trotsky’s. However Trotsky, unlike Stalin, had no charisma when it came to personal interaction, this can be seen in the Politburo meetings of 1926 and 1927 where Trotsky would regularly get into arguments¹⁵. Stalin in contrast was highly charismatic. H.G. Wells met with Stalin and claimed he was sincere and honest, saying “there is nothing dark and sinister about him.”¹⁶ Fitzpatrick argues that Stalin used his charisma to form alliances such as that with Zinoviev and Kamenev. He was, in a way Trotsky simply wasn’t, a people’s person, able to manipulate his opponents creating an illusion of trustworthiness and honesty. Trotsky’s charismatic deficiency was an opportunity Stalin couldn’t miss.

Stalin’s ideology played a massive role in his success. Realising that international spread of Communism was not likely in the near future he became determined to ensure the country was not forced into a series

¹² M. Lynch, “Stalin and Krushchev” 2nd ed., Hodder & Stoughton, 2001, pg14

¹³ L. Trotsky, “Stalin” pg 381

¹⁴ I.D. Thatcher, “Trotsky and Lenin’s Funeral, 27 January 1924: a brief note” “History”(Vol. 94) Wiley, 2009, pg. 200

¹⁵ S. Fitzpatrick, “On Stalin’s Team”, Princeton University press, 2015, pg37

¹⁶ Ibid., pg.95

of foreign adventures by Trotsky. His ideology, known as "socialism in one country", did not rely on the spread of Bolshevism throughout Europe therefore the failure of Communists such as the Spartacists in Germany and Béla Kun in Hungary contributed significantly to this theory's success over Trotsky's¹⁷. As the failure of communism in the rest of Europe was completely outwith Stalin's control it supports the role opportunism played in his rise to power. The theory proved popular among the Rightists such as Bukharin as it appeared to work alongside the NEP. It was because of this compatibility that Stalin was able to work alongside Bukharin in order to crush the Left opposition and ensure the defeat of "Permanent Revolution", although had it not been for Stalin's apparent mediocrity in the party, Bukharin would never have trusted him therefore Stalin's ability to refrain from appearing as a threat is still crucial to this argument.

Using Stalin's ideology as an explanation of his success is difficult when we consider the inconsistency in his political leaning. Bukharin once said at a secret meeting with Kamenev, "He changes his theories according to whom he needs to get rid of next"¹⁸. This can be seen when he supports Zinoviev and Kamenev to remove Trotsky, then Bukharin and the NEP to remove Zinoviev and Kamenev, then he adopted rapid industrialisation, the policy of those he had just defeated, to remove Bukharin, his last opponent. Although this U-turn shows how Stalin was sufficiently cunning to run circles around his opponents, it seriously hinders any argument suggesting that Stalin's ideology was the most important factor contributing to him gaining power. His ideology was both inconsistent and adopted from other leaders; such as his policy of rapid industrialisation which was taken from Zinoviev and Kamenev. What this shows is that although Stalin was not an able theoretician, his ideology was still fashioned to help outmanoeuvre his opponents thus proving how crucial his ability as a politician was. Further analysis suggests Stalin's ideology may not have been necessary at all to defeat his opponent as he had already ensured his opponents had no chance of victory through his gang style politics. At the 20th party congress, looking back at the events of the leadership struggle, Khrushchev claimed "He (Stalin) abandoned the method of ideological struggle for that of administrative violence." Stalin used for instance, his power over the OGPU to remove oppositionists who

¹⁷ S. Lee, "European Dictatorships 1918-1945", Routledge, 2008 pg61

¹⁸ Bukharin at secret meeting with Kamenev, July 1928, as in C. Corin & Terry Fiehn, "Russia under Tsarism and Communism 1881-1953", Hodder education, London, 2011

demanded the publication of their pamphlet entitled "The Real Situation in Russia" and over the next few months following the 15th party congress, two thousand "oppositionists" were expelled for attempting to share their beliefs¹⁹. Despite this supporting the image of Stalin as a cut-throat politician gaining power through underhandedness, factionalism (of which the oppositionists had been accused of) had long since been outlawed by Lenin himself to improve party stability. Thus Stalin could have been following Lenin's example and not simply using the ban as an opportunity to seize more power by outing his opponents. His U-turn highlights how important his worker support base was as it proves they were oblivious to the academic principles of socialism and would simply follow whoever their regional party leaders followed, in this case, thanks to his administrative powerbase, Stalin.

Opposing the suggestion Stalin was using ideology to remove opponents, Ward argues that if we consider the dilemmas of the time, Stalin's indecisiveness begins to make sense. He claims that Stalin was "not so much an opportunist as a practical politician balancing between extremes²⁰." His U-turn could have been justified when we take into account the realities of the country's economic situation in the preceding years. In 1928 government grain purchase fell two million tons short of what was required.²¹ The NEP was simply not effective. Nove points out that as it made few reforms "NEP was doomed"²². Stalin's theories proved popular among the workers who had suffered under the NEP as they encouraged Russian, soviet patriotism thereby ensuring the opinions and votes of the bulk of workers present in the party after the Lenin enrolment were in Stalin's favour.

¹⁹ C. Ward, "Stalin's Russia" 2nd ed. , Hodder headline group, 2002, pg16

²⁰ *ibid*, pg26

²¹ I. Deutscher, "Stalin", Penguin books, 1949, pg314

²² A.Nove, "An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.", 1978, pg142

To what extent did Stalin rise to power thanks to the mistakes of his opponents?

Trotsky, despite being an incredible orator and pivotal in the October Revolution, lacked the ability to endear himself towards his comrades and peers leading to him being disliked and distrusted. Lynch argues the importance of this claiming that the resultant distrust and dislike of Trotsky offers an "explanation of Stalin's success"²³. Trotsky paid little attention to the internal battles of the party and failed to realise that without supporters he would be unable to stop the inevitable rise of Stalin. This ensured that no matter how brilliant his speeches, the sheer number of Stalin's supporters at party conferences would render his talents useless, however it can be said that this was an achievement of Stalin's exceptional ability to accumulate support and not a mistake by Trotsky. Although Trotsky's lack of a powerbase was opportune for Stalin, without Stalin's power base, Trotsky's superior speeches would have been a significant disadvantage and so by taking care to build his powerbase Stalin was responsible for his own success and it was not an act of opportunism.

One of Trotsky's predominant issues was that many of his opposing leaders were all too aware of the fate of the French Revolution, in which a military figure rose to power and led as dictator. Trotsky, the Commissar for Warfare, who did little to endear himself to others and often acted contrary to the majority of the party's beliefs, fitted the description of a Bonaparte figure. Ward claims, "Bonapartism continued to haunt the leadership's collective imagination."²⁴The view of Trotsky as a Bonaparte figure was amplified by his obsession with the international spread of Bolshevism. However the fact that even when Trotsky relinquished his control of the army, depleting what little powerbase he had, people still feared him shows it was not simply his military power which others detested. The only explanation of this, is that they disliked him due to his egotistic temperament and short temper.

Service believes that although Trotsky was able to identify Stalin as a threat, he was more concerned about battling Bukharin and the Right than dealing with Stalin and the imminent threat he posed²⁵, this became

²³ M. Lynch, "Stalin and Krushchev" 2nd ed., Hodder & Stoughton, 2001, pg19

²⁴ C. Ward "Stalin's Russia, 2nd ed., Hodder Headline Group, 2002, pg34

²⁵ R. Service, "Trotsky", Macmillan, 2009, pg358

his undoing as he was unprepared when Stalin struck, accusing him of factionalism and removing him from his position of power. Further examples such as, when Trotsky claimed Stalin had tapped his phones, showed it was not opportunism which gained Stalin power, as these problems faced by Trotsky were deliberately created by Stalin himself. However Trotsky's personal flaws, such as his lack of determination, suggest that Stalin was simply taking advantage of his opponent's weakness. Gordon believes that unlike Stalin who "was absolutely determined to achieve a dominant position,"²⁶ Trotsky simply was not and this led to his failure. In other words he suggests Trotsky's biggest flaw was that he did not have the determination required to triumph in the contest. As Stalin's victory can be associated with him taking advantage of Trotsky's indifference towards the leadership; it can therefore be ascribed to opportunism.

Stalin's other opponents made the same mistake as Trotsky in underestimating him: even when his immense power and influence had been revealed he was practically ignored by his opponents. For instance after the Left had been crushed, with Bukharin and the other Right leaders having witnessed Stalin's capability, they still refused to believe that he would ever do something as bold as to turn on them. The fact that even when Lenin's Testament was shown to the contenders, making specific references to Stalin's rising power and his inability to use it properly, they still refused to heed the warning, demonstrates their own blindness was overwhelming. The Testament was direct; it recommended that Stalin lose the position of General Secretary²⁷. Had this been made public, particularly as Lenin was so highly respected, it would have destroyed Stalin's reputation in the party; he would no longer have been able to portray himself as Lenin's heir as he had done at Lenin's funeral. By disregarding Stalin as a threat, the opponents were condemning themselves as they allowed him to build his powerbase without resistance. However this example and many others could have been carefully orchestrated by Stalin himself as he maintained his anonymity deliberately. This shows his political ability and manipulative nature was more important than the foolishness of his opponents. Stalin intentionally rarely stated his opinion at the Politburo as stealth and underhandedness were major components of his acquisition of power. Thus we can see that the others overlooking him was partially because that's what he wanted them to do, and so instead of the others'

²⁶R. Gordon, "Modern History Review", Hodder education, 1992

mistake, this is actually an example of Stalin's political strength. This would suggest opportunism played a lesser role in his rise to power.

²⁷ C. Ward "Stalin's Russia, 2nd ed., Hodder Headline Group, 2002, pg11

What part did Luck play in Stalin's rise to power?

Luck played a massive role in Stalin's rise to power as the more we look at the series of events the more we see just how many of these events were out with Stalin's control. McCauley would argue that Stalin "had luck on his side"²⁸. One example being that Trotsky, his main competitor was ill, and so on leave, when Lenin died. Even the death itself was lucky for Stalin, as Lenin died without naming a successor at a time when Stalin was well positioned to assume control. Dzerzhinsky had already died in 1926. He did not like Stalin and would have severely hindered Stalin's rise to power by preventing him from using the secret police and intelligence services to his advantage. However his death allowed Stalin to inject his supporters into the political police and use them as a tool against his opponents. This death, without any evidence proving Stalin caused it, was completely lucky and shows how Stalin was in part simply in the right place at the right time. Another fortunate death was that of Sverdlov, the best organiser within the Communist Party who died in March 1919 from Spanish Flu. This opened the door for Stalin to accumulate his massive organisational powerbase which, as already proved, played a massive role in him gaining power. Although all three of these deaths were acts of fate, had Stalin not been the astute politician he was, he would have not been able to utilise the advantage they gave him to the same extent. After the death of Sverdlov, had Stalin not had the skills required to do the job he would never have been offered the vacant positions he required to gain power. Stalin had luck on his side which by the time of the leadership struggle had generated ideal conditions for him to accumulate power, thus supporting the role of opportunism in Stalin's rise to power.

It appears to be that Stalin did have luck on his side, however he needed more than simply luck to gain power and it was only by taking advantage of these fortunate circumstances that he was able to gain control of the Communist Party, thus although the deaths of three major party members were opportune, it was Stalin's brilliance as a politician which allowed him to follow these opportunities through.

²⁸ M. McCauley, "Russia 1917-41", 1997, pg78

Conclusion

Stalin was able to come from being a grey personality on the sidelines of the Politburo to being the supreme leader of Russia and the Communist Party. Throughout the leadership struggle he was incredibly fortunate thanks to the deaths of multiple major personalities in the party and also the mistakes of others which facilitated his victory. Many of Stalin's triumphs during this period were simply examples of him taking advantage of these events which would suggest that Stalin's rise to power was one pushed through by opportunism. However, Stalin must be given credit for the amount of times he shows that he was not stumbling onto an empty throne thanks to other's mistakes but was in fact, through his own cunning and political ability, outmanoeuvring and removing his enemies. Through situations like his defeat of the Left with the help of Bukharin, only to turn on Bukharin and defeat the Right or when he was able to overcome the fact that he was a member of a party in which no-one took him seriously shows us that he was clever and manipulative. Without both of these traits he would never have been able to gain power. Stalin was able to win over the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers who made up the base of his support and were vital to his triumph at the party conferences. Whether this was thanks to his supporters in regional positions or his superior theories we can still conclude that both show he was able as a politician contrary to the beliefs of Trotsky and Bukharin. In conclusion Stalin, in his rise to power, was taking advantage of his incredibly lucky situation and so it can be said that, at least to an extent, Stalin's rise was one of opportunism. However, Stalin was able to turn any situation he was in into one advantageous to himself; this was no easy feat and was only achieved because of Stalin's brilliance as a politician. Thus Stalin's rise to power was one of opportunism however this doesn't detract from the fact that no other politician could have achieved it with such ease.

Bibliography

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C. Corin & Terry Fiehn, "Russia under Tsarism and Communism 1881-1953", Hodder education, London, 2011, - As this is a text book and the authors are teachers and not historians I did not quote any opinions from this, only a primary source.

R. Conquest, "Breaker of Nations", 1991, - Provided arguments that Stalin was a superior politician.

I. Deutscher, "Stalin", Penguin books, 1949 – provided helpful statistics which gave a reason for Stalin's left turn.

S. Fitzpatrick, "The Russian Revolution, Oxford university press, 2008 – This book was very useful describing the effect of Lenin's testament, it also looked in depth at Trotsky's temperament

S. Fitzpatrick, "On Stalin's Team", Princeton University press, 2015- provided an alternative look on Stalin's personality, as it is very modern it helped provide a fresh perspective.

G. Hosking, "A history of the Soviet Union", 1985- mentions the iconic quote "comrade card-index" also explained why people distrusted Trotsky

M. Lynch, "Stalin and Krushchev" 2nd ed., Hodder & Stoughton, 2001 – explained the importance of some of the major events during the leadership struggle, for instance the funeral.

M. McCauley, "Russia 1917-41", 1997 – explained the part luck had to play effectively

A. Nove, "An Economic History of the U.S.S.R."- This book was incredibly useful describing Stalin's industrial plans, the economic state pre-Stalin and what made Stalin's industrial plans so popular.

R. Service, "Trotsky", Bleknop press, 2011 – as it is a bibliography of Trotsky it provided more information about the failings of Trotsky and how Stalin deceived him.

C. Ward, "Stalin's Russia", 2ed, Hodder & Stoughton, 1993 – incredibly useful providing a range of different takes on how Stalin came to power, some of which I could not find anywhere else

J.N. Westwood, Endurance and Endeavour, 1973 –gave a good example of how Stalin allowed his opponents to defeat each other.

L. Trotsky, "Stalin" Useful as a primary source of evidence showing Trotsky's opinion of his downfall.

S. Lee, "European Dictatorships 1918-1945", Routledge, 2008 pg61 provided an alternate view towards the success of Stalin's theories.

Magazines

¹R. Gordon, "Modern History Review", Hodder education, 1992 – despite only being a short article it was packed with quotable, useful information

I.D. Thatcher, "Trotsky and Lenin's Funeral, 27 January 1924: a brief note" "History" (Vol. 94) Wiley, 2009, pg. 200 Provided an alternate view on the role of Trotsky in his absence at Lenin's funeral.