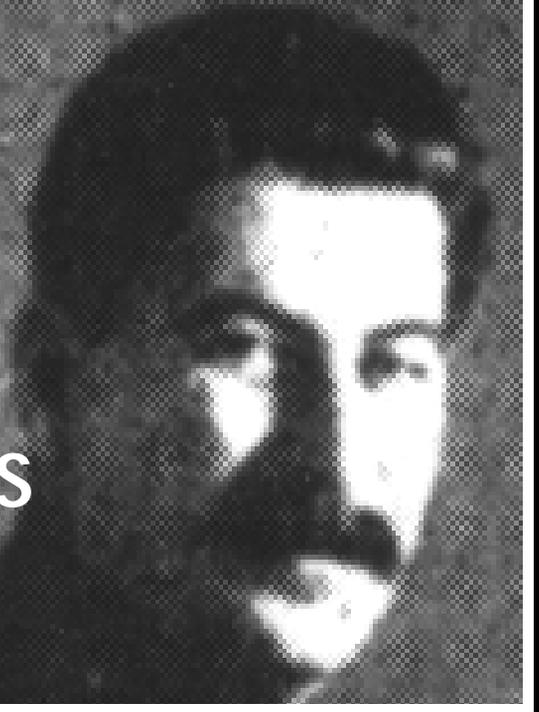


# STALIN'S USURPATION OF POWER: A LIBERTARIAN ANALYSIS



STUART BARROW



## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I evaluate the factors which led to Stalin's assumption of power as head of the Soviet Union. There is no better case study in history for libertarian historians interested in the significance of the individual and in the corruption made possible by the centralised bureaucratic power model that is the very antithesis of a liberal system of government. I examine why Stalin's rivals did not secure the leadership for themselves by highlighting both their mistakes and Stalin's successes, notably in Stalin's interpretation of Leninism. I note the rise in bureaucratic centralisation and then I reject the Trotskyite interpretation and Martin McCauley's over emphasis on luck. I conclude that Stalin's accession was the culmination of his own skill, of his opponents' mistakes, and of just a little good fortune.

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www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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Stuart Barrow was awarded a BA in International Relations at Staffordshire University, and is a former National Secretary of the Conservative Students.

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame  
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## ONE DICTATOR DOWN ...

It is perhaps an overstatement to claim that Stalin's leadership of the Soviet Union was totally unexpected. Lenin himself left obvious suspicions of the Georgian in his Testament. As Martin McCauley notes:

Stalin had concentrated "unlimited authority" in his hands and Lenin was not sure whether he would "always be capable of using that authority with sufficient caution".<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Lenin was so concerned that he advised his comrades to "think of a way of removing Stalin" from the post of General Secretary.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless it remains an enigma of Soviet history that the head of State should be General Secretary of the ruling Party. Again, to quote McCauley, his appointment as General Secretary in 1922

did not make Stalin nominal head of the Party, since the Secretariat did not then possess the power it was later to acquire; in 1922 the Politburo was still the key decision-making body. Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin all appeared to be senior to Stalin.<sup>3</sup>

McCauley raises two important issues, both of which are worth close examination: the acquisition of power by the party machine personified by Stalin, and the failure of apparently more senior Bolsheviks to gain the Soviet leadership for themselves after Lenin's death. Let us examine both of these factors to discover how important either or both were to Stalin's usurpation of power, starting with the latter.

Lenin's reliance on Trotsky as a substitute mouthpiece for the arguments which his illness prevented him from personally espousing, and his verdict that Trotsky

was the ablest senior Bolshevik, certainly appear to show that Lenin wished the Commissar for Army and Naval Affairs to play a major role in the future governing of the USSR.<sup>4</sup> It is likely that Lenin wished to be replaced by a committee rather than by one man. He warned of the dangers of splits in his Testament, for example, and set up Sovnarkom as a “cabinet”.<sup>5</sup> (Even Lenin realised the potential importance of the individual, even against the power of the ‘social forces of history’ and of the Marxist dialectic.)

But rivalry and splits continued after Lenin’s death, and Trotsky bore the brunt of senior Bolshevik jealousy, caused by Trotsky’s rapid rise in the Party he had joined only in 1917. In 1922 an unofficial triumvirate was formed by Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin, specifically to block Trotsky.<sup>6</sup>

Trotsky’s first major error of political judgement came in October 1923. His speech against the power of Stalin’s bureaucracy, calling for party democracy, played into the hands of the triumvirate, who found it all too easy to accuse Trotsky of hypocrisy. Militarised labour was after all Trotsky’s brain child. The Central Committee (CC) condemned Trotsky and held him indirectly responsible for the Platform of the Forty-Six.<sup>7</sup> Trotsky’s alleged involvement in the platform must have tarred him with the ‘anti-Lenin’ brush, a reputation which would prove fatal, Trotsky’s later actions (or at least Stalin’s reporting of them) only seeming to reinforce this image.

Also, Trotsky was a prisoner of his health. Instead of defending himself, he was convalescing in the Caucasus, far from the political action of Moscow and Petrograd. He added to his anti-Lenin reputation by missing Vladimir Ilyich’s funeral, of the date of which Trotsky claimed to have been misinformed by Stalin. McCauley sees this as a “lame excuse”.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, if Trotsky is correct, this shows the extent of Stalin’s yearning for power. Either way, Trotsky’s absence helped to seal his fate.

Trotsky’s disastrous *Lessons of October*<sup>9</sup> did not so much cause his downfall as merely hasten it. As he intended, Trotsky did manage to discredit Zinoviev and Kamenev, though rather later than he expected. Kamenev’s riposte *Lenin or Trotsky* made clear the splits between Zinoviev, Kamenev and Trotsky, and exposed their deficiencies in print. Not only did the accusation of being anti-Lenin induce a clamour among Bolsheviks in support of Lenin, it also made a farce of the 1926 United Opposition, whose leaders spent years openly and relentlessly “pulling each other apart”.<sup>10</sup>

The mood in Russia was one of veneration for the man who had led the Bolsheviks triumphantly to power and kept them there despite a civil war, foreign intervention, and near famine, and McCauley claims that Zinoviev blundered by portraying himself as Lenin’s equal in his account of Lenin’s legacy.<sup>11</sup> Zinoviev and Trot-

sky were too respectful of Lenin’s wish to be buried in a humble grave like a good a Marxist. Lenin’s widow, Krupskaya, also opposed the relentless sycophancy — the mausoleum, the renaming of Petrograd to Leningrad, the publications promoting Leninism as opposed to Marxism. But her earlier argument<sup>12</sup> with Stalin ensured that he used his control of most of the press to deny her any platform for her views (not that her views would have been respected anyway).

In contrast, Stalin showed great political cunning in his lectures, and in his subsequent publication *The Foundations of Leninism*. Leninism “not only restored Marxism, but also took a step forward”, “Lenin was right”, “Lenin wrote ... prophetic words”, “Lenin ... became ... the leader of the international proletariat”.<sup>13</sup> And so it continued, page after page of extremely comprehensible praise from Lenin’s humble and devoted apostle. Stalin’s more intellectual comrades never mastered the populist approach at which Stalin excelled. Stalin dedicated his work, for example, to the “recruits of the Lenin enrolment”,<sup>14</sup> thus consolidating his position as leader of those new members whom he had encouraged and scrutinised in 1924 and 1925. Over 250,000 recruits were now indoctrinated by Stalin’s appointees and henchmen in the Secretariat, with the need to observe party loyalty.<sup>15</sup>

Stalin’s next *coup de theatre* was to boost Bolshevik morale, which was suffering seriously from the lack of any progress in exporting the proletarian revolution. Stalin reinterpreted the prophecies of Lenin and rubbished Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution:

[A] great chasm ... lies between Lenin’s theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat and Trotsky’s theory of ‘permanent revolution’... According to Lenin, the revolution draws its strength primarily among the workers and peasants *of Russia itself* [my emphasis]. According to Trotsky, the necessary strength can be found *only* [Stalin’s emphasis] “in the arena of the world proletarian revolution”.<sup>16</sup>

Stalin seized the initiative by proposing ‘socialism in one country’ (which pleased the left), a union between workers and peasants (which pleased the right), and by casting aside any fears that the October revolution had been in vain. To quote McCauley:

Now the Soviet Union could become the pace-setter and not have to wait on world events. It was a great psychological shot in the arm for the party and the nation.

Stalin’s manipulation of the XIVth Party Congress in 1925 saw the defeat of Zinoviev. ‘Socialism in one country’ helped Stalin to swing the party against the Leningrad delegation (which Zinoviev chaired) and thus isolate it. The pro-peasant policies would continue. The left (the United Opposition) had lost, partly because of their previous attacks on each other, but partly also because of the weather. The peasants were

saved by the sun, their bumper crop in 1926 exploding the predictions of starvation from the United Opposition.<sup>18</sup> It was therefore hardly necessary to lambast the *Declaration of the Eighty-Three*<sup>19</sup> for its alleged treason against the revolutionary state. Trotsky was already down, and Stalin was by now merely kicking him. The United Opposition could not fight back because Stalin's censorship prevented them from answering the "increasingly violent language" issued by the party machine.<sup>20</sup>

The rapidity of Zinoviev's and Trotsky's expulsions from the Party show just how powerful the 'socialism in one country' camp had become. Stalin now faced only Bukharin from the right. The General Secretary could safely return to the left as leader of the super-industrialisers with no obvious equal, the old leaders having been expelled and discredited.

Again Stalin was helped by the weather. This time the peasants could *not* feed the cities and the *right* lost the initiative. Bukharin had no credible allies, his Right Opposition with Tomsky and Rykov being denounced as mercilessly as the United Opposition had been. An alliance between him and Kamenev was useless because the latter had lost his Central Committee seat, and all his credibility. Also:

Although an able economist, he [i.e. Bukharin] never produced a convincing plan to counter the dreams of the superindustrialisers.<sup>21</sup>

### THE POWER OF THE CENTRALISED BUREAUCRACY

Let us recount Stalin's victories. Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Tomsky and Rykov were all defeated, a common element in their fall being the propaganda strength of the party machine, which Stalin controlled.

How had Stalin's Secretariat accumulated so much power? Trotsky claims that Stalin

took ... power, not with the aid of personal qualities, but with the aid of an impersonal machine.<sup>22</sup>

The machine was born of necessity, to increase efficiency and to spread ideas.

Stalin's first qualification was a contemptuous attitude toward ideas.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, Trotsky was murdered before completing this argument, but it is in line with general historical opinion: Stalin did not create the machine, he simply mastered it.

Yakov Sverdlov started the process of party centralisation and by 1919

the Soviet Central Committee had lost all of its actual power to the C.C. of the party, the transfer having been made as it were from Sverdlov's government office to his party office, while locally

the Soviet committees were entirely subservient to the corresponding party committees.<sup>24</sup>

The Politburo, Orgburo, Rabkrin (the peasants and workers Inspectorate), and Central Committee all listed Stalin among their membership. The creation of the General Secretariat in 1922 provided Stalin with the means to consolidate his gains. For this position he owes much to Sverdlov's timely death and the ineffectualness of Preobrazhensky and Serebryakov at running the old Secretariat. Their dismissal from that body allowed for the advancement of Molotov, Yaroslavsky and Mikhailov, all allies of Stalin. As Maramuth notes, Stalin had

begun convincing a growing group of Bolshevik politicians eager for advancement [such as the above mentioned three and also Kirov and Kuibyshev] that he was able to reward the faithful with political plums. At least that attribute of leadership was his.<sup>25</sup>

But Stalin's promotion was no accident. It would be foolish to believe that Stalin was simply the *only* man available for the post when he was in fact the *best*. Stalin's ruthlessness was perfect for quelling the Workers' Opposition and thus he received Lenin's personal nomination.<sup>26</sup>

Stalin's relentless quest for power led him to expand his jurisdiction. He removed authority from hostile Provincial, County and Local Control Commissions, to the Central Control Commission which he controlled. A Party Collegium established to liquidate Oppositionists was packed with Stalin's allies.<sup>27</sup> More and more senior officials owed their offices and lifestyles to Stalin, in a time of hardship. This base of subsequent loyalty was to show its power clearly against Zinoviev at the XIVth Congress.

The power of the bureaucracy was unquestionable, a point forcefully made by Krupskaya in 1926:

If Volodya [i.e. Lenin] were still alive, he would be in prison.<sup>28</sup>

The question was: who would take full advantage of this bureaucracy? The answer was Stalin, if only because he was surrounded by intellectuals in the Central Committee who would have seen office work as either beneath them or of little interest to them.

### THE GREAT MAN OF HISTORY

McCauley has suggested that there was an element of luck in Stalin's rise to absolute power. If Lenin had lived, the party would have been persuaded to accept the next best bureaucrat to replace Stalin. If Sverdlov had not died in 1919, he, not Stalin, would have become General Secretary, thus denying Stalin his base of power. If Dzerzhinsky had not died in 1926, Stalin's ally Kuibyshev could have been promoted to head the key economic committee VSNKh.<sup>29</sup> I do not accept this interpretation in its entirety.

Lenin's death certainly prevented Stalin's demotion into the political wilderness. However, whilst Sverdlov's death did enable Stalin to gain control of the party machine in one swoop, all the evidence points to a gradual building up of support and power by Stalin anyway. He had a seat on all major bodies, chaired *Pravda*, and had shown his ability to consolidate power seemingly from nowhere in earlier positions:

[Stalin] seized control ... [of *Pravda* in 1917, and then in 1918 he] ... was sent to Tsaritsyn as extraordinary Commissar for food supply. In fact he took over all power in the Tsaritsyn region, squeezing out and subordinating to himself all local, Soviet, Party and military organs.<sup>30</sup>

Stalin's amazing skill in accumulating power might well have been enough to make him the overall leader even without the General Secretariat, because he was constantly accumulating the *substance* of power.

Dzerzhinsky's death does not strike me as crucial either. By 1926, Stalin was ready to fight against the right and Bukharin, so the leftist Dzerzhinsky would have been an ally rather than a rival. As Trotsky has noted, Dzerzhinsky and Stalin had fought together in Georgia. Both were condemned as "Great Russian chauvinists" by Lenin, and in 1921 — a crucial step forward for Stalin — Dzerzhinsky turned a blind eye to Stalin's reorganisation of the Georgian Party into a Stalinist base. "This was the first victory."<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, we have seen that Stalin had one aim: political power at any cost to others. He envied and sought to destroy all who were more powerful than he.<sup>32</sup> It was a focus which paid high dividends. Stalin's ambition saw him gain and consolidate power wherever he was sent, in whatever post he was appointed. No separation of power existed (bourgeois liberalism!) so 'cometh the hour, cometh the man': Stalin had joined the Great Men of history.

His relative indifference to ideology, and his unsurpassable ability to twist the ideas of others were crucial. Stalin could swing from right to left in the power struggle, deify Lenin and pillory his rivals:

Stalin perfected the art of classifying his opponents' mistakes in such a way as to totally ignore their services and to stress not only their real mistakes but also imaginary ones, until it became difficult to understand how such people could have been among Lenin's closest colleagues in the Party leadership.<sup>33</sup>

Always the intellectual underdog, Stalin remained in touch with the Communist Party rank and file. He was ideologically flexible, and with a mixture of intrigue, intense ambition, good fortune and skill at practical administration, Stalin created a network of allies which he used to defeat his more intellectual — but less cunning — rivals.

## NOTES

1. Lenin's Testament cited by McCauley in *Stalin and Stalinism*, Longman, Harlow, Essex, 1983, p. 13.
2. Cited in McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 13.
3. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 12. Trotsky was head of the Red Army and Navy, Zinoviev chaired the Petrograd Soviet and the Communist International, Kamenev chaired the Moscow Soviet. All three, together with the economist, Bukharin, held seats on the Central Committee of the Party, and the Politburo.
4. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 13.
5. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 8. Sovnarkom was subsequently surpassed by the power of the Politburo.
6. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 14.
7. The Platform was a letter signed by forty-six Communists opposing the Central Committee's pro-market New Economic Policy. It followed Trotsky's own attack on NEP. See McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, pp. 10-11.
8. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 14.
9. *Lessons* was Trotsky's attack on Zinoviev and Kamenev. Responses to it were full of resentment.
10. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 17. The United Opposition was a leftist attack on pro-peasant policy. Its leaders were Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev.
11. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 17.
12. Much of Lenin's scorn against Stalin (in his Testament) stemmed from a row between Stalin and Krupskaya which left her in tears. Krupskaya was therefore a threat to Stalin's position.
13. All quotations come from Stalin, "The Foundations of Leninism", in Stalin, *Leninism*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1940, pp. 5-8.
14. Stalin, *The Foundations of Leninism*, p. 1.
15. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, pp. 15-16.
16. Stalin, "The October Revolution and the Tactics of the Russian Communists", in Stalin, *Leninism*, pp. 92-93.
17. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 16.
18. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 17.
19. The *Declaration* suggested that Trotsky would not necessarily fight to save the revolutionary state at a time when the Chinese were spreading the fear of war by massacring Communists and when the British had raided Arcos, the All Russian Cooperative Society.
20. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 22.
21. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 22.
22. Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence*, edited by Charles Malamuth, MacGibbon and Kee, London, 1968, p. xv.
23. Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. xv.
24. Trotsky, *Stalin*, pp. 344-345.
25. Maramuth's addition to Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 348.
26. Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 351. The Workers Opposition were militant trade unionists, calling for more power of their own.
27. Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 350 and p. 367.
28. Krupskaya quoted in Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 381.
29. McCauley, *Stalin and Stalinism*, p. 22.
30. Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1971, pp. 7-12.
31. Trotsky, *Stalin*, pp. 360-361.
32. See Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. xv.
33. Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, p. 69.