



## 4. STALIN'S RISE TO POWER

### TOPICS:

The Politburo  
The struggle to succeed Lenin  
Key historical perspectives

The struggle to succeed Lenin originated not with his death in 1924 but from 1922 when he suffered the first of a succession of strokes and was increasingly incapacitated. By 1929, Josef Stalin had emerged as the sole leader of the Communist Party but back in the early 1920s few Russians would have predicted his rise to power.

#### How was Stalin able to secure the leadership of the Communist Party?

1. Stalin was a member of the *Politburo* and *Orgburo*, the top committees within the Party and **he held several powerful positions within the Party apparatus**; in particular, Lenin appointed him General Secretary in 1922. He was able to use this to develop a power base within the Party, as he could promote and dismiss influential Party officials, particularly local Party secretaries. Stalin realised that the key to power lay in control over the Party organisation, rather than within state institutions. The Party grew rapidly, numbering 800,000 by 1925 and over 1.5 million by 1929. As its membership expanded, control over it became increasingly centralised, concentrating enormous power in Stalin's hands. Trotsky, Stalin's main rival for the leadership, although a hugely influential figure, and Commissar for War, held no significant position within the Party apparatus and so was unable to develop his own power base to compete with Stalin.
2. **Stalin's rivals underestimated him.** Lacking the charisma or the oratorical brilliance of Trotsky, the other leading figures in the Party ignored the 'grey blur', as Stalin was once dubbed, and concentrated their efforts on preventing Trotsky from gaining control over the Party.
3. Stalin was a very skilful political operator and was able to play off different factions within the Party leadership against each other.

These divisions were partly the result of:

- **Personal rivalries**, for example, Kamenev and Zinoviev resented Trotsky's arrogance and were prepared to work with Stalin against Trotsky in the period of 1922–1925. During this period, Stalin, Kamenev, and Zinoviev formed a three-man leadership team, known as the '*triumvirate*' or '*troika*'. They combined to force Trotsky's resignation as Commissar for War in 1925. Only in 1926 did Zinoviev and Kamenev decide to work with Trotsky in the so-called 'United Opposition', but by then it was too late to prevent Stalin removing them from the *Politburo*.

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