

Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin

Rise to Power

After the October Revolution of 1917, Stalin, already a member of the central committee since 1912, entered the Soviet cabinet as people's commissar for nationalities and began to emerge as a leader of the new regime. During the civil war from 1918 to 1920 he played an important administrative role on the military fronts and in the capital. He was elected (1922) general secretary of the central committee of the party, enabling him to control the rank-and-file members and to build an apparatus loyal to him.

Stalin's significance in the revolutionary movement and his relation to Lenin have been subjects of great controversy. He was highly regarded by Lenin as an administrator but not as a theoretician or leader. Toward the end of his illness, which began in 1922, Lenin wrote a testament in which he strongly criticized Stalin's arbitrary conduct as general secretary and recommended that he be removed. However, he died before any action could be taken, and the testament was suppressed.

On Lenin's death, Stalin, Kamenev, and Grigori Zinoviev formed a triumvirate of successors allied against Trotsky, who was a strong contender to replace Lenin. After Trotsky was ousted (1925) as commissar of war, Stalin, now allied with Nikolai Bukharin, turned on Kamenev and Zinoviev. In a desperate attempt to counter Stalin's power, Zinoviev and Kamenev joined forces with Trotsky. Their efforts failed and they were forced to resign from the central committee of the Communist party. Stalin subsequently broke with Bukharin and engineered his fall from power.

A primary issue around which these party struggles centered was the course of the Russian economy. The right wing, led by Bukharin, favored granting concessions to the peasantry and continuing Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). The left, represented by Kamenev and Zinoviev, wished to proceed with industrialization on a large scale at the expense of the peasants. Stalin's position wavered, depending on the political situation, and the NEP continued until 1928 with considerable success. Then Stalin reversed this policy and inaugurated collectivization of agriculture and the Five-Year Plan. Ruthless measures were taken against the kulaks, the farmers who had risen to prosperity under the NEP.

Prewar Years

The political and cultural aims of Stalin's regime were to identify the totalitarian rule of the Communist party with stability and legitimacy. The basic Marxist tenet of the ultimate "withering away" of the state was all but repudiated. Instead the state was glorified. The shift to the right was also manifest in the reorganization of the armed forces along disciplinarian lines reminiscent of the reign of Czar Nicholas I; in the official return to conservative divorce and abortion laws; in the gradual replacement of intransigent measures against the Russian Orthodox Church by a policy that made the church an instrument of the state; in the abandonment of experimental education in favor of rigid instruction; in the insistence on political criteria in the

arts; and, most important, in the rebirth of nationalism and the mounting distrust of the West and of internationalism.

Stalin maintained that his program of consolidating "socialism in one country," although demanding immense sacrifice and discipline, would render the USSR immune to attacks by capitalist nations and would demonstrate the superiority of the socialist system. He thus repudiated, for the time being, the role of the Soviet Union as torchbearer of world revolution.

This process was accompanied by repressive measures and terror, which led to the collectivization famines (1930–33) and political purges of the 1930s. Stalin made his dictatorship absolute by liquidating all opposition within the party. The murder (1934) of S. M. Kirov, Stalin's lieutenant, led to prosecutions for an alleged plot—vast, Trotsky-inspired, and aided by Nazi Germany—to overthrow Stalin's government. In the purge trials many old Bolsheviks, including Kamenev, Zinoviev, Aleksey Rykov, and Bukharin, were accused, pleaded guilty, and were executed.

The purges extended even to the head of the secret police, G. G. Yagoda, and to some of the highest army officers, notably Marshal Tukhachevsky. The terror reached its height under the *Yezhovshchina*, the period (1937–38) when N. I. Yezhov directed the secret police. As the purges drew to a close (1939), the efforts of the secret police were concentrated on eliminating those elements of the population that might be disloyal in case of war. The Soviet system of forced labor camps, the Gulag, was hugely expanded during this period.

In internal policy, Stalin promulgated a new constitution in 1936 (see Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). Although it contained symbols of democratic institutions, effective political power was reserved to the Communist party as the vanguard of the working people. Although it reaffirmed the Soviet principle of autonomy for the various nationalities, the constitution in effect made it impossible for republics or other national groups to secede from the union.

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