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POLITICAL THEMES -

How did stalin gain and maintain sole power?

Introduction

Stalin's political career was seemingly ended by Lenin's *Political Will & Testament* which Lenin had dictated to his secretary in December 1922 after his second stroke. It was a document that critiqued the suitability of the leading members of the Communist Party to replace him. Lenin openly favoured Trotsky as the man with the most outstanding ability within the Party. In contrast, he denounced Stalin for his inability to use his unlimited authority with sufficient caution and demanded that he be removed from his position as General Secretary.

Stalin's secretary, Bazhanov, recalled Stalin's emotional reaction as fellow Bolshevik leader Lev Kamenev read Lenin's document aloud.

A painful confusion paralysed the audience. Stalin...felt himself small and pitiable...In spite of his self-control and enforced calm one could see clearly from his face that his fate was in the balance.²



Leader of the Russian revolution, Lenin.

Recommendations to have Stalin removed from office were overlooked because Stalin promised to correct his faults. Stalin remained. What shape might the Soviet Union's future have taken if Stalin had indeed been removed at that secret meeting in 1924? Although his fate had been in the balance due to Lenin's Testament, Stalin's political survival allowed him to remain as General Secretary of the Communist Party. From this position, he was able to gradually impose his agenda in the political battle for control of Lenin's regime.

If one removes the problem of predictability associated with hindsight, it would certainly not have been guaranteed in 1924 that Stalin would eventually become the new leader of Communist Russia. While Stalin had held several leadership positions after the 1917 Revolution, they were mostly perceived as mundane administrative roles. The widely preferred candidate to succeed Lenin was Leon Trotsky, who had been named in Lenin's Testament as 'the most capable man in the present Communist Party'³ and was a popular Civil War hero with the proletariat.

This chapter explores political themes of Stalin's rule focusing on the key questions of how he gained and then maintained his dominance of Soviet politics. While Stalin won the battle for control of the leadership of the Communist Party, the climate of intense political and personal manoeuvring between members of

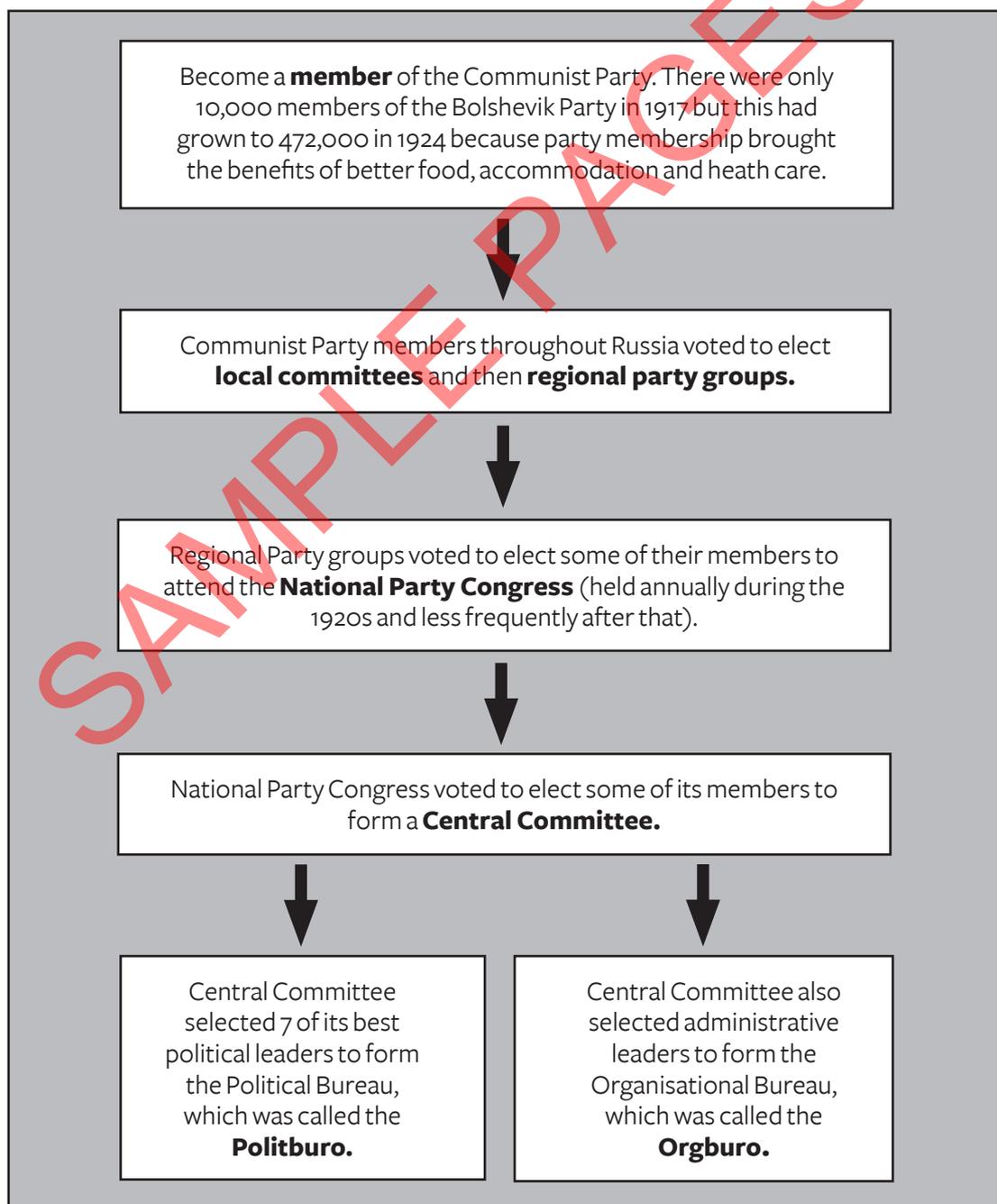
the Politburo must never be understated. Four elements are revealed by examining how Stalin gained and maintained power: his political cunning; his inward focused ideology of socialism in one country; his political ruthlessness; and his political climate of fear and favouritism.

Political structure

After dismissing the Constituent Assembly in 1918, and outlawing all other parties in 1922, Lenin's death in 1924 saw Russia as a one-party state. The Bolshevik Party, now called the Communist Party, ruled unchallenged.

Soviet political system - the theory

Decision making within the political system often seems quite complex in theory whereas in practice it functioned quite simply. Similar to democratic voting systems within western countries, there were several levels of leadership through which talented Party members could be promoted.



Soviet political system - the practice

The main difference with this system in practice was that actual power lay in the control of the final leadership level, the Politburo. Instead of leaders being *elected* from below, they were *selected* from above. This had a dramatic impact on Party politics. To be promoted, instead of being popular amongst your peers, prospective leaders had to gain the favour of a current leader above them who could ensure that they were appointed. While power was officially shared between the government and the Politburo, it became increasingly apparent that it was the Politburo that held the real authority.

Implications of this political system

Stalin's political structure and system had three significant implications. The first implication of this system in reality was that a complicated network of favours and voting loyalty developed. This heavily bureaucratic system was manipulated successfully by Stalin to gain sole control of the nation after Lenin's death. The second implication was that the Soviet Government was therefore controlled by the Communist Party. While the Communist Party was NOT the official government, it made all the important decisions which were legitimated and implemented by the government system. The third implication was perhaps the most damaging. Whereas Lenin had taken power in 1917 to form the dictatorship of the proletariat, he left Russia with a complex system of privilege and elitism within the Communist Party. Western historians like Orlando Figes argue that the elite Communists fought to preserve their privileges in the same way as had the gentry in the Tsar's regime. For example, once leader, Stalin had an unlimited bank account and historian Medvedev argues that his personal expenditure was equal to that of Tsar Nicholas II. He had a fleet of foreign cars including Rolls Royces and Cadillacs.

