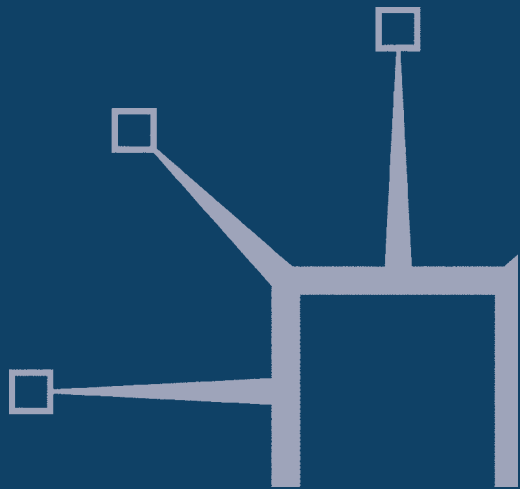


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The Nature of Stalin's Dictatorship

The Politburo, 1924–1953

Edited by
E.A. Rees



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Preface

This book is the outcome of a research project undertaken at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Birmingham, and funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (grant no. R 000 237388), 'The Soviet Politburo and Economic Decision-Making and Development in the Stalin Era'. As part of the project, a conference was organised at the European University Institute in Florence on 30–31 March 2000 on 'Stalin's Politburo', and a follow-up meeting of the Work Group was held at the University of Birmingham in August 2001. ESRC finance provided support for these meetings, as well as money for travel to Moscow, library purchases, funds for secretarial support, and financial support for a Russian and a Ukrainian collaborator.

The project drew on newly available archival materials from the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation (APRF), the Russian State Archives of the Economy (RGAE), the State Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF, formerly TsGAOR) and from the Russian State Archives of Social-Political History (RGASPI formerly RTsKhIDNI). It draws also on materials from several local archives: the Central State Archives of Social Organisations of Ukraine (TsDAGO), and the State Archives of Vinnitsa oblast (GAVO).

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Glossary of Russian Terms and Abbreviations Used in Text

Amtorg	Amerikansoe aktsionernoe torgovoe obshchestvo (American joint-stock trading company)
CC	Tsentral'nyi komitet (Central Committee of the Communist Party)
CCC	see TsKK
Cheka	Chrezvychainaya Komissiya (Extraordinary Commission, political police), later GPU or OGPU
Comintern	Communist International
CPSU(b)	Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)
'dekulakisation'	expropriation of 'kulaks'
Donbass	Donetskii ugol'nyi bassein (Donets coal basin)
GKO	Gosudarstvennyi Komitet Oborony (State Defence Committee)
gorkom	city party committee
Gosbank	Gosudarstvennyi Bank (State Bank)
Gosplan	Gosudarstvennaya Planovaya Komissiya (State Planning Commission)
GPU	see OGPU
Gulag	Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei (Main Administration of Labour Camps)
IKKI	Ispolnitelnyi Komitet Kommunisticheskogo Internatsionala (Executive Committee of Comintern)
ispolkom	ispolnitel'nyi komitet (executive committee of the soviet)
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti (Committee of State Security)
kolkhoz	kollektivnoe khozyaistvo (collective farm)
kolkhoznik	collective farm worker
KomIspol	Komissiya Ispolneniya (Commission of Implementation of Sovnarkom)
Komsomol	Kommunisticheskii Soyuz Molodezhi (Communist League of Youth)
KomZag	Komitet po zagotovkam sel'sko-khozyaistvennykh produktov (Committee for the Collection of Agricultural Products)

KPK	Komissiya Partiinnogo Kontrolya (Commission of Party Control)
krai	territory
kraikom	territorial party committee
KSK	Komissiya Sovetskogo Kontrolya (Commission of Soviet Control)
'kulak'	rich peasant
MGB	Ministerstvo Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti (Ministry of State Security)
MTS	Mashino-traktornaya stantsiya (Machine-Tractor Station)
MVD	Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del (Ministry of Internal Affairs)
narkom	narodnyi komissar (people's commissar)
NEP	Novaya ekonomicheskaya politika (New Economic Policy)
NKAviaProm	Narodnyi Komissariat Aviatsionnoi Promyshlennosti (People's Commissariat of the Aviation Industry)
NKFin	Narodnyi Komissariat Finansov (People's Commissariat of Finance)
NKGB	Narodnyi Komissariat Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti (People's Commissariat of State Security)
NKInDel/NarkomIndel	Narodnyi Komissariat po Inostrannym Delam (People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs)
NKLegprom	Narodnyi Komissariat Legkoi Promyshlennosti (People's Commissariat for Light Industry)
NKLes	Narodnyi Komissariat Lesnoi Promyshlennosti (People's Commissariat of the Timber Industry)
NKOboron	Narodnyi Komissariat Oborony (People's Commissariat of Defence)
NKObrazovaniya	People's Commissariat of Education
NKPishProm	Narodnyi Komissariat Pishchevoi Promyshlennosti (People's Commissariat of the Food Industry)
NKPros	Narodnyi Komissariat Prosveshcheniya (People's Commissariat of Education)

NKPS	Narodnyi Komissariat Putei Soobshcheniya (People's Commissariat of Ways of Communication, i.e. Transport)
NKPT	Narodnyi Komissariat Pocht i Telegrafov (People's Commissariat of Posts and Telegraphs)
NKRKI	Narodnyi Komissariat Raboche-Krest'yanskoi Inspektsii (People's Commissariat of Workers' and Peasants' Inspection also known by its acronym Rabkrin)
NKSnab	Narodnyi Komissariat Snabzheniya (People's Commissariat of Supply)
NKSovkhoz	Narodnyi Komissariat Zernovykh i Zhivotnovodcheskikh Sovkhozov (People's Commissariat of Grain and Livestock-rearing State Farms)
NKSvyaz	Narodnyi Komissariat Svyazi (People's Commissariat of Communications)
NKTorg	Narodnyi Komissariat Vneshnei i Vnutrennoi Torgovli (People's Commissariat of External and Internal Trade)
NKTrud	Narodnyi Komissariat Truda (People's Commissariat of Labour)
NKTsvetMet	Narodnyi Komissariat Tsvetnoi Metallurgii (People's Commissariat of Non-Ferrous Metal)
NKTyazhprom	Narodnyi Komissariat Tyazheloi Promyshlennosti (People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry)
NKVD	Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs)
NKVMDel	Narodnyi Komissariat Voенно-Morskikh Del (People's Commissariat of Military and Naval Affairs)
NKVod	Narodnyi Komissariat Vodnogo Transporta (People's Commissariat of Water Transport)
NKYust	Narodnyi Komissariat Yustitsii (People's Commissariat of Justice)
NKZag	Narodnyi Komissariat Zagotovok (People's Commissariat of Procurements)
NKZem	Narodnyi Komissariat Zemledeliya (People's Commissariat of Agriculture)
nomenklatura	appointment list controlled directly or indirectly by the party
obkom	province party committee

oblast	province
OGPU (GPU)	Ob"edinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie (Unified State Political Administration, Political Police)
oprosov	procedure of approving decisions by polling members of the Politburo
Orgburo	Organisational Bureau of the Central Committee
ORPO	Central Committee's Department of Leading Party Organs
politotdely	politicheskie otdely (political departments)
pod	measure of weight, equalling 36.1 British pounds
raikom	district party committee
raion	district, administrative unit
RSFSR	Rossiiskaya Sovetskaya Federativnaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic)
ruble	unit of currency
sovkhoz	sovetskoe khozyaistvo (state farm)
SovMin	Soviet Ministrov (Council of Ministers, successor to Sovnarkom)
Sovnarkom/SNK	Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov (Council of People's Commissars)
stazh	duration of membership (of Communist Party)
STO	Sovet Truda i Oborony (Council of Labour and Defence)
troika	committee or group of three persons
trudoden'	labour day, measure of work
Tsentrosoyuz	Vsesoyuznyi tsentral'nyi soyuz potrebitel'skikh obshchestv (All-Union Central Union of Consumer Cooperative Societies)
TsIK	Tsentral'nyi Iсполnitel'nyi Komitet (Central Executive Committee of the Soviets of the USSR)
TsK	see CC
TsKK	Tsentral'naya kontrol'naya komissiya (Central Control Commission of the party)
TsSU	Tsentral'noe Statisticheskoe Upravlenie (Central Statistical Administration)
TsUNKhU	Tsentral'noe upravlenie narodno-khozyaistvennogo ucheta (Central Administration of National Economic Records)
UkSSR	Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic

USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
valyuta	hard currency
Vesenkha/VSNKh	Vyshii Sovet Narodnogo Khozyaistva (Supreme Council of the National Economy, succeeded by NKTyazhprom)
VKP(b)	see CPSU(b)
<i>vozhd'</i>	leader
VTsIK	Vserossiskii Tsentral'nyi Ispolnitel'nyi Komitet (All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets)
VTsSPS	Vsesoyuznyi Tsentral'nyi Soviet Professional'nykh soyuzov (All-Union Central Council of the Trade Unions)

Introduction

The study of Soviet history in the Stalin era is connected inseparably to the study of the system of political leadership. At the heart of this system lay the Politburo, vaunted as the communist party's supreme decision-making body, and as such the supreme decision-making body in the country. But the precise role of the Politburo has long remained a matter buried in mystery, and the reality of the Politburo's power has always been a matter of contention. To what extent was it a real decision-making centre, and to what extent a mere façade that concealed the reality of a system based on Joseph Stalin's personal power? To what extent did this system of political leadership have a bearing on the decision-making process? This book sets out to explore these questions, drawing on the archival sources that have become available since the collapse of the system of communist rule in 1991.

Stalin as the party's General Secretary was seen as the leader of the Politburo, and the Politburo comprised the leading political figures in the USSR, representing the most powerful party and state institutions, and the most important regional and republican interests. All the major pronouncements were made in the Politburo's name. Each year, 2000–3000 decisions would be issued secretly in the Politburo's name. The thousands of decisions emanating from the Soviet governmental apparatus (Sovnarkom and the Central Executive Committee) were also seen as carrying the Politburo's sanction. The Politburo was presented as the supreme decision-making body in the country, as well as the highest court of appeal. There was no field of policy in which it could not involve itself, and there was no other institution, and no legal or constitutional law, that it could not overturn. The Politburo was the embodiment of the Bolshevik one-party state and of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

2 Introduction

The Politburo's supremacy was underlined by the doctrine of 'democratic centralism', which held that all positions in the party were elected, that all higher party bodies were answerable to subordinate bodies, and that all decisions taken by the party had to be supported loyally by all. In 1921, the one-party state was consolidated, and in that year also the principle prohibiting factions in the party was established. Within the party at all levels the principle of collegiality was proclaimed as the basis of collective decision-making and collective responsibility. In reality, internal party democracy in the 1920s was compromised severely, with the defeat of successive opposition groupings, and by 1929 the party had embraced the doctrine of monolithic unity.

The Politburo's work was always shrouded in mystery. The party's power was hidden behind the façade of Soviet power at each level of the political hierarchy, from the local soviets to the Central Executive Committee (TsIK) of the All-Union Congress of Soviets. Alongside the Politburo, the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) was presented as a form of Cabinet that supposedly was answerable to TsIK, but in fact was answerable to the Politburo.

The problem of reconciling the notion of Politburo rule in the USSR with the notion of Stalin's personal power has always posed a problem of interpretation. Given the paucity of information regarding the actual functioning of the Politburo, various viewpoints were advanced. N. S. Khrushchev's notion of the 'cult of personality' pointed to the rise of a system of personal dictatorship in the 1930s in which the Politburo for much of the Stalin era was a relatively powerless institution. Others presented this as an attempt at self-exculpation for complicity in the crimes of the Stalin era. Historians in the past speculated on how far Stalin was constrained by his Politburo colleagues on how far he had to manoeuvre between different factions. The polar opposite to Khrushchev's assessment was the view of Stalin as a rather weak leader, who followed rather than created events, and who was pushed by the opinion of his colleagues and the pressures from powerful institutions.

The archival revelations since the early 1990s, the publication of the Politburo's protocols, and the Politburo's daily agenda, the publication of Stalin's appointment diaries, the availability of Stalin's correspondence with senior colleagues such as V. M. Molotov and L. M. Kaganovich all provide a basis for a more considered assessment of Stalin's actual power. The work undertaken by leading scholars in the field has clarified many of these questions.¹ The notion of Stalin as a weak leader is no longer tenable. Stalin was a dominating personality who exercised

unprecedented power over the direction of policy in the USSR from the time of V. I. Lenin's death in 1924 until his own death in 1953. Attempts to find evidence of a powerful Politburo that constrained Stalin, evidence of factional divisions within the Politburo between which Stalin had to manoeuvre, of cases where Stalin's will was thwarted, have largely failed.

Having said this, however, the question remains of what exactly was Stalin's position within the system of leadership in the USSR. How did he exercise his power? How did he relate to his colleagues? How did he manage this system of power to secure his own continuing dominance? How much power and influence did Stalin's colleagues wield? How far was his system of rule based on institutional power, and how far was it based on Stalin's own personal authority? On what matters of policy was his influence decisive, and which issues did he delegate to his subordinates? Did the system of rule change over time? How does our understanding of the system of rule at the political system's apex influence our understanding of major policy decisions – the collectivisation and industrialisation drives, the Great Terror, the indecision in the face of the threat of German invasion in 1941? How can we characterise this system of rule? How could personal dictatorship be reconciled with what was supposed to be a system of collective leadership?

The basis of the Stalinist system had been laid in no small part by Lenin. His scheme for party organisation in *What Is To Be Done?* of 1903 drew fierce criticism from other Marxists (Trotsky, Martov, Luxemburg, Plekhanov, Akimov) as an elitist scheme, which held the political awareness of the masses in contempt, and which would lead to a dictatorial party system over the working class. L. D. Trotsky, in *Our Political Tasks* (1904) famously predicted the outcome of such an approach to party organisation:

In the internal politics of the Party these methods lead... to the Party organisation 'substituting' itself for the Party, the Central Committee substituting itself for the Party organisation and finally the dictator substituting himself for the Central Committee.²

A. J. Polan argues that Lenin's very conception of Marxist ideology, with its emphasis on the correct line, its contempt for 'bourgeois' politics and 'parliamentarism', its rejection of 'bourgeois' conceptions of individual liberty and 'pluralism', involved a severe restriction, if not an outright denial, of politics as the free exchange of ideas, debate, bargaining and compromise.³ The culture of the Leninist party, its intolerance of other

viewpoints, its ideological zeal and self-righteousness, its hatred of those defined as class enemies, and its willing embrace of violence for political ends, imbued it with a strong propensity towards authoritarianism. The party from the October revolution claimed to embody the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and, as with all dictatorships, this was unconstrained by law.

Leonard Schapiro presents 1921 as a decisive turning point. Having established the one-party state, Lenin at the same time instituted a system of strict internal party discipline: the ban on factions; the repudiation of the 'anarcho-syndicalist deviation'; the granting of the power to the Central Committee to expel any of its own members; and the creation of the Central Control Commission as the body to enforce the ban and to police the party membership. Schapiro argues that, by 1921, the basis for a dictatorship within the party had been established, and the possibility of maintaining free debate within the party effectively undermined.⁴

Leninism was informed by an obsessive Jacobinical drive for centralisation and control that had its own inherent logic. The Bolsheviks' willingness to embrace repression and terror as a strategy of rule after October 1917 suggests that here there were strong lines of continuity with the Stalin era, even, if in terms of internal party democracy, there is much clearer evidence of a decisive break between Leninism and Stalinism, as Stephen Cohen has argued.⁵

Lenin's own position within the party was itself a subject of intense interest. Appeals by Maxim Gorky and N. A. Rozhkov to Lenin in 1919 that he establish a personal dictatorship to save the country from catastrophe were rebuffed.⁶ In March 1921, Lenin soundly rebuked Adolf Ioffe for characterising Lenin's role in the party 'the Central Committee – it is I' (*Tseka – eto ya'*), a parody of Louis XIV's *'L'état ces moi!'*⁷ He insisted that at no time had he been in a position to dictate to the party, but had to persuade the party to adopt his policies. In October 1917, he threatened to resign from the party over the question of the seizure of power. In the spring of 1918 he had to use all his authority to get the party to approve the signing of the humiliating terms dictated by the Germans with the Brest-Litovsk treaty. In 1921–22 he was at the centre of the row over the trade unions, and had to fight tenaciously to get the party to accept the New Economic Policy.

The Soviet regime created in the wake of the October revolution rested on five basic pillars of power: (i) the Communist Party; (ii) the state bureaucracy; (iii) the Red Army; (iv) the Cheka/GPU; and (v) the institutions of mass organisation, including the soviets and the trade

unions. The nature of the state was determined to a large extent by the interrelationship and relative power of these institutions. In the early years of Soviet power, the supremacy of the party as the dominant authority was proclaimed. It supposedly provided the leading force organising the state bureaucracy, the military and internal security apparatus. These institutions were to be balanced by the institutions of mass democracy, themselves controlled by the ruling party, as representatives of popular sovereignty and as checks on the power of the bureaucratic party–state apparatus. The problem of maintaining the balance within and between these various institutions posed considerable problems for the Soviet regime.

In the years after October 1917, the Bolshevik party acquired as a coherent, organised structure. It sought to organise its activities on the basis of ‘democratic centralism’. With the ban on factions, centralised control over appointments and the huge expansion of the nomenklatura, the power of the central party bodies over the lower tiers was strengthened. Nevertheless, through the convening of annual party congresses and conferences in 1917–25, there was a determined effort to create structures of democratic procedure. Debate in the Central Committee was often very lively. The Politburo was the acknowledged authority, but it was accountable to the Central Committee that met on a regular basis. By 1923, the growing power of the central apparatus, the Secretariat headed by Stalin, was already drawing strong criticism for its domination of the party’s internal life, and control of appointments.

Lenin addressed these problems in his final writings – especially, ‘How we should reorganise the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate’ and ‘Better Fewer But Better’. In these two articles he sought to create the framework of a self-regulating party dictatorship. The plan was to make the Politburo answerable to an enlarged party forum, combining the members of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission (TsKK). This party Parliament was intended to have great authority (through the involvement of members of the TsKK in the work of the People’s Commissariat of Workers and Peasants Inspection – that would develop their expertise in the organisation of the work of the state and expertise in all policy areas). This dual body was intended as a check on the Politburo, and a check on the danger of the Politburo being riven by factional conflict.⁸

Lenin anticipated that organisational measures might be inadequate to contain the threat of dictatorship or the dangers of reckless policy adventures. He already feared the danger of a rift between Trotsky and Stalin. He sought to find a solution in the calibre of those who would

succeed him. This was the question he turned to in his final Testament. Within such a highly centralised system, the personal factor, he recognised, could become decisive. In his postscript to the Testament he famously called for Stalin's removal as party General Secretary, fearing that his abrasiveness, and his ruthless accumulation of power, might pose serious dangers for collective leadership in the future.

Lenin, noted as a factionalist before 1917, after October of that year embraced an inclusive style of leadership, and drew into the party's leadership people with whom he had previously clashed: Trotsky was brought into the leadership in 1917 after years of the most violent polemics between himself and Lenin; G. E. Zinoviev and L. B. Kamenev were retained within the leading circle despite the fact that they had opposed the October seizure of power and had publicised Lenin's plans in the press. Lenin believed that, after his death, the leadership of the party through the Politburo should continue as a collective enterprise.

A central concern of Lenin's final writings was the danger of an inexperienced party being unable to steer the machinery of state, and the fear that the regime might be overcome by cultural backwardness. The problem was very real, and applied at all levels of administration. At the very apex of the political system, the transition from the Lenin to the Stalin era undoubtedly meant a lowering of the intellectual and personal qualities of those guiding the state. At the lower levels, the quality of training, experience and general competence of officials was certainly much lower than in the tsarist period. This had profound implications for policy-making and policy implementation, and must in large measure account for the sheer crudity and wastefulness of the Stalinist state administration, and its predisposition for simplistic and dictatorial responses.

Lenin's plan to create a self-regulating dictatorship was almost certainly unworkable. The way in which it was put into operation exacerbated the problem. Notwithstanding Lenin's strictures, Stalin retained his post as party General Secretary. The TsKK-NKRKI was set up, but from the outset was placed in the charge of individuals loyal to Stalin (headed in turn by V. V. Kuibyshev, G. K. Ordzhonikidze, A. A. Andreev and Ya. E. Rudzutak). In the succession struggles after Lenin's death in January 1924, this apparatus worked in tandem with the apparatus of the Secretariat and Orgburo, headed by Molotov and Kaganovich, two of Stalin's leading aides. The strengthening of the central leadership's position brooked no opposition.

The centre set the direction and tone of policy to isolate and defeat Trotsky in 1924, and the Joint Opposition of Zinoviev, Kamenev and

Trotsky in 1926. In these struggles, Stalin relied on the support in the Politburo of the 'Rightists' – N. I. Bukharin, the party's leading ideologist, A. I. Rykov, chairman of Sovnarkom, and M. P. Tomsky, the head of the trade unions. In 1928–29, Stalin, using his base in the party apparatus and in the control organisations, turned on his erstwhile allies and secured sole control over the Politburo. His rivals were taken aback by the ruthlessness with which he pursued his drive for power. Bukharin famously described him to Kamenev as a 'Genghis Khan', who would kill them all.⁹

From 1921 to 1929 the party and the political system more generally underwent a huge transformation. The Bolsheviks established their monopoly of power in 1921 with the banning of other parties, the exile and imprisonment of their political leaders, and in 1922 the show trial of the leaders of the Socialist Revolutionary party. Within the Bolshevik party, the ban on factions did not prevent intense factional struggle in the 1920s, but it ensured that whoever controlled the party apparatus was bound to win. By 1929, the Stalin faction had triumphed. In the course of this period there was a dramatic restriction of internal debate within the party. The last really open debate involving the party rank and file concerned the discussion in 1923–24 on measures to deal with the scissors crisis. The debate indicated substantial support for Trotsky among student, military and worker cells in Moscow. The debate was promptly closed down.¹⁰

Robert Service has demonstrated how Stalin and his supporters rediscovered in 1923–24 Lenin's pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?* and used it to justify their own restrictive interpretation of internal party democracy.¹¹ The influx of new party members in 1924–25, the famous Lenin enrolment, saw the imposition of tight central control over the selection, training, and ultimately expulsion, of those deemed unsuitable.¹² At the same time, the central party apparatus greatly enlarged its role in managing party affairs. This control was strengthened further by the fixing of agendas of congresses and plenums, the rigging of elections of delegates and officers, the control of discussion in the party, through the management of the education and admission of new members, and through periodic purges of the party's ranks. Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism*, dedicated to the new recruits of the Lenin enrolment, turned the dead leader's thought into a catechism.¹³ Kaganovich's handbook for new recruits on party organisation underlined the central importance of hierarchy and discipline, and downplayed democracy.¹⁴

While the Politburo was nominally accountable to the Central Committee and party congress, the party Secretariat and Orgburo,

headed by the General Secretary, came to exercise enormous weight in the party's decision-making. This constituted the core of the central party machine, staffed with its own officials and instructors who were empowered to investigate the work of lower party and state institutions, call their officials to account, and issue instructions on the interpretation and implementation of party policy. Molotov and Kaganovich played a key role in the development of this apparatus.¹⁵ These institutions were linked closely to the apparatus of party and state control – TsKK–NKRKI. This gave the General Secretary considerable power *vis-à-vis* other members of the Politburo.

While the 1920s saw a dramatic erosion of internal party democracy, the centralisation of power was constrained by the existence of other power centres. From the outset, the Politburo, as the main forum of party decision-making, operated alongside the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), which Lenin headed from 1917 to 1924. He was succeeded by Rykov, who held the post until December 1930. During the struggle with the Right Opposition in 1928–29, the governmental apparatus backed the 'Rightists'. The appointment of Molotov as chairman of Sovnarkom in December 1930 was intended to avoid such conflict emerging again.

In his drive for supremacy Stalin employed the tactics of factional manipulation but Stalin was also able to appeal to different constituents in the party and state apparatus on the basis of policy, which he adopted to changing circumstances. Stalin's embrace of the 'left turn' of 1928 mobilised support around the drive for industrialisation.

In the 1920s, other power centres were represented by economic institutions – the Commissariat of Finance and the Commissariat of Foreign Trade, and the trade unions (VTsSPS). With the 'revolution from above' these increasingly were eclipsed by Gosplan and Vesenkha (and its successor NKTyazhProm). Outside the economic sphere were the institutions responsible for defence (NKVMDel), internal security (Cheka, OGPU) and foreign policy (NKInDel). The other major institutional interests were represented by powerful city, republican and regional lobbies. The most important were the city authorities of Moscow and Leningrad, the Ukrainian SSR as the most important republican authority, and powerful regional lobbies, such as that of the Urals.

This created the need to integrate these various interests into the main party decision-making bodies. It gave rise to what R. V. Daniels named as the 'job-slot' system, whereby the most important party and state institutions were represented at the level of the Politburo and Central Committee. Important agencies that were not represented in

the Politburo (NKIndel and OGPU) nevertheless exercised great influence on policy in their specialised fields.

In the past, historians have speculated as to when Stalin achieved dictatorial powers in the USSR. Various turning points were identified. Stalin's appointment as General Secretary of the party in 1922 was seen as a major strengthening of his power. The celebration of his fiftieth birthday in 1929 was another turning point. Some saw it as being related to the events at the XVII party congress and the subsequent assassination of S. M. Kirov in 1934, while others saw it as the product of the Great Terror. And others questioned how far Stalin ever attained dictatorial power. This reflected lack of precise data and a lack of precision in defining what dictatorship meant.

The Soviet government as a revolutionary regime, but one lacking a broad base of social support, sought to guarantee its survival through institutionalised power. It never subjected itself to democratic election, but it did endeavour to win a degree of popular consent, or at least compliance. The attempt to rule the society during NEP through what Terry Martin has called 'soft line institutions' was replaced by a return to reliance on 'hardline' institutions, as the regime after 1928 reverted to a strategy of 'revolution from above', aimed at effecting a rapid transformation of the economy and society in accordance with its revolutionary goals.¹⁶

The 'revolution from above' weakened the party's role, transforming it from a political party and the main forum of policy debates into an institution largely given over to the management of the state apparatus. The state apparatus, with the enormous expansion of the government's role in planning and managing industry, agriculture and trade, grew enormously. This was associated also with a significant weakening of the republican and regional tiers of administration. The power of the internal security apparatus, allied to the growth of the Gulag forced-labour system, was expanded greatly. The power of the military grew in response to a deteriorating international climate. At the same time, the influence of mass organisations such as the soviets and trade unions was weakened significantly.

From 1928 to 1953, the Soviet leadership system, and of the Politburo in particular, changed in very significant ways from one period to another. The period of the Great Patriotic War, 1941–45, and the post-war years of 1945–53 are very different from the 1920s and 1930s. But through the 1920s and 1930s, the system evolved constantly, with quite different sub-periods having their own structures and procedures. How this system developed after 1928 is the basic subject of this book.

In analysing the operation of the leadership system, we need to be aware of the possibilities for comparative analysis, but also of the dangers of over-simplified comparisons, which fail to take into account the specificities of different systems. In Western presidential (USA and France) and prime-ministerial (UK) systems, the role of the Cabinet varies enormously. This reflects the difference between systems in which the leader is elected directly by the electorate compared to one in which the leader is elected by his/her party. It also reflects differences of style. Some incline towards a more collegial, and others a more personalised approach. In most Cabinets, decision-making tends to be concentrated in a small number of hands. In the case of the UK Cabinets, the Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary and Minister of Defence have traditionally been the key players.

The way in which individual leaders manage their subordinates reveal certain striking similarities between systems: the importance of promotion and demotion; the building up of clients and the building up of rivals to check one another; the drawing in of personal advisers and alternative sources of information to counter the influence of over-powerful ministers and their departments; the extensive use of policy sub-committees to resolve problems; the building up of a private office as a counter to the civil service. This depends on the abilities of the leader to dominate subordinates, to carry an argument in Cabinet, or where necessary to appeal over the heads of Cabinet colleagues to supporters in the party and in Parliament. The leader's power is constrained by the power of colleagues, the support they can command in the inner councils and outside, and by their indispensability to the leader.

Cabinets are generally rather ineffective bodies for decision-making; they are too large and meet infrequently. This confers potential power on small, inner groups. But regular Cabinet meetings provide a structure and discipline within which such groups operate. It provides a forum in which policies have to be defended and justified. It provides the basis for policy appraisal and review. It offers the possibility of the decisions taken by the inner group being overturned. Individuals can resign and thus move outside the bonds of collective responsibility to air their criticisms in the party or Parliament. The Cabinet is the forum where votes of confidence in the leader or individual ministers can be taken. For individual leaders, their subordinates are both their colleagues and potentially their most dangerous enemies. Cabinets provide the framework within which this powerplay is worked out.¹⁷ In the absence of such mechanisms there is the danger not only of the enormous concentration of unaccountable power in the hands of one individual, but

also the obvious danger that the political struggle takes on a raw and unmediated form.

In democracies, the constraints on elected leaders are considerable. A cursory comparison between the Stalin leadership and periods of 'crisis government' in liberal states immediately brings out fundamental differences.¹⁸ Political theorists, from Niccolò Machiavelli to Carl Schmitt have drawn a fundamental distinction between temporary dictatorship, to deal with internal or external emergencies when normal constitutional rules are suspended, and permanent dictatorship established (for Machiavelli, this was the crucial distinction between justified and necessary dictatorship, and tyranny, which he reviled).¹⁹

In democratic systems, the constraints imposed by party, Parliament, constitution, rule of law, election, and public opinion greatly restrict the actions of leaders. During the Second World War, Winston Churchill was obliged to report regularly to his War Cabinet and to deal with outspoken criticisms of his policies in Parliament and in the press. In periods of radical transformation (for example, the years of government in Britain under Margaret Thatcher) the tendency is towards a highly personalised system of rule, with decisions taken within a small inner group. During the Falklands War of 1982, the normal functioning of the Cabinet was suspended, and decision-making was concentrated in a small War Cabinet, comprising the Prime Minister, with a handful of ministers, military chiefs and personal advisers. Nevertheless talk of 'prime-ministerial dictatorship' or 'elective dictatorship' in Britain in the 1980s was hyperbole. Ultimately, Mrs Thatcher was unable to persuade her party parliamentary colleagues to re-elect her as their leader. In the USA, the decision of President Johnson not to seek re-election in 1968, the decision by President Nixon to resign in 1974, and in France the decision of President de Gaulle to stand down in 1969, all offer testimony to the limits on personal power in democratic states.

Advocates of the totalitarian approach to Soviet politics placed the role of the dictator at the centre of their analysis. This reflected an 'intentionalist' view of Soviet history, where it was the political motive of the leader, shaped by the peculiar psychological formation of the leadership within a conspiratorial revolutionary organisation, the impact of revolutionary methods of organisation and intrigue, and the all-encompassing ideological aspiration for the transformation of society and mankind, which shaped the regime and its relations with society. Individual dictators might be driven by a mixture of motives – ideology, considerations of power maximisation, and self-glorification. The culture of the revolutionary party, its conception of its enemies, its moral self-righteousness

and its fanatical zeal provide an impetus towards authoritarian rule. In this approach, the cult of the leader and his core following within the totalitarian party provide the key for understanding the system of totalitarian dictatorship.

The totalitarian conception of politics adopted the model of despotic or tyrannical rule to the needs of the modern age – the age of mass parties, mass politics, modern ideologies, industrial economies and modernising regimes. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski addressed in their work the interrelationship between totalitarianism and autocratic or dictatorial rule.²⁰ Other scholars have argued that the Soviet model was in many ways more primitive, more primordial, compared to, say, the totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany. In 1983, Carl A. Linden characterised the Soviet party-state, and other communist regimes, as an ‘ideocratic despotism’.²¹ The Stalinist system cannot be understood divorced from its ideological heritage,²² nor from the specific structures of party organisation and discipline of the Communist Party.²³ This is the biggest objection to attempts to place the Stalinist system within the definition of neo-patrimonial rule.²⁴

‘Structuralist’ interpretations of the Stalinist regime highlight the factors that shaped it, independent of the aims and intentions of the leaders themselves. The main determining forces might be identified as follows: the crisis of governance in a country that had experienced revolution and civil war; the problems of overcoming economic and social backwardness; the external constraints imposed by a hostile international climate; and the legacy of the country’s culture and tradition. From this perspective, the ideology of the Bolsheviks was transformed, and the composition of the party and its very psychology was changed over time. Trotsky, in *Revolution Betrayed*, offers a Marxist, structuralist interpretation of the Stalin regime.²⁵ In this, he was at pains to play down the importance of Bolshevik ideology, mind-set and practices in shaping the regime, and to minimise the role of Stalin as an individual.

Other historians have argued that the totalitarian approach pays insufficient attention to the peculiarities of different leadership systems. Ian Kershaw, in his comparison of the Nazi and Soviet leadership of Adolf Hitler and Stalin, brings out striking differences as well as similarities in terms of the structure of power and the style of leaders. In comparison to leaders in liberal democratic systems, Hitler and Stalin had a lot in common – both were dictators heading mass parties guided by a messianic ideology and unconstrained by the rule of law. Both regimes sought unprecedented control over the economy and society, and were

also guided by the aspiration to extend their domination beyond their own territories. At the same time, there remained important differences in the way they functioned and developed (see Chapter 7).²⁶

The work of scholars such as R. V. Daniels and T. H. Rigby cast important light on aspects of Soviet leadership system. Graeme Gill offered the most ambitious effort to conceptualise the Stalinist political system.²⁷ Attempts by John Löwenhardt and Niels Erik Rosenfelt to undertake more detailed analysis of the Politburo and Stalin's personal apparatus of power faced serious difficulties because of the paucity of data.²⁸

In the past, attempts to investigate the very secretive workings of the Soviet leadership system suffered from very limited sources. Apart from published Soviet documents, only the information of exiles or defectors – some of whom had been near to the centre of power (Trotsky, or Stalin's private secretary Boris Bazhanov) – and others who were more remote (G. Bessedovsky, Alexander Orlov, A. Avtorkhanov, Boris Nicolaevsky). It involved the piecing together of the testimony of individual witnesses (Roy Medvedev). A major source was provided by those first-hand observers of Stalin's leadership at work, notably N. S. Khrushchev and Milovan Djilas. Biographies of Stalin (by Deutscher, Souvarine, McNeal, Ulam, Tucker, Volkogonov, Radzinski) and other leaders, and works discussing 'Stalinism' as a concept offered their insights into the nature of this leadership system.

The information that is now available after the archives have been worked on over the 1990s is immense. We now know almost as much about the internal workings of the leadership under Stalin as we do of any major leader in a Western liberal state. We have the protocols of the Politburo (the huge files of working papers and special files – *osoby papki*), the agenda items of the Politburo recording the decisions taken, and the lists of people who attended meetings in Stalin's private office in the Kremlin. We have the accounts from Stalin's close colleagues – Molotov, Kaganovich and Georgi Dimitrov – by way of recorded memoirs, and diaries, as well as their correspondence with Stalin. We have the accounts of people closely involved in the work of government (N. K. Baibakov, Pavel Sudoplatov) and accounts of those close to Stalin's inner circle (Maria Svanidze).

This allows us to construct the operations of the leadership system in a way that previously was impossible. Yet delving into the secretive operations of the leadership remains difficult. The decisions that were taken informally, in private conversations and telephone calls, are not preserved. We know more about the operation of government in

1930–36 when Stalin was on vacation than when he was in Moscow. The operation of the regime in the period up to 1936 is easier to document than the period of the Terror after 1936 and the post-war years, which are shaped by a bizarre and often incomprehensible culture of conspiracy and intrigue.

When we return to the question of how the Soviet leadership might be characterised, and the approaches that are available for such a reappraisal, it is easier to start with the empirical data. This not only allows us to see the regularity of the meetings of the main party institutions of power, and to measure the way in which collective leadership might be superseded by personal dictatorship; it also allows us to measure the way in which the Politburo at times adjusted its work to take into account the growing burden of decision-making.

Different authors have characterised Stalin in different terms – *vozhd'* (leader) autocrat, dictator, despot and tyrant. Each term carries its own connotations. The terms 'autocrat' and 'dictator' carry somewhat less loaded meanings than 'despot' or 'tyrant'. Trotsky characterised Stalin's rule as a form of Bonapartism, but he also referred to him in an article in the magazine *Life* in 1939 as 'The super Borgia in the Kremlin'.²⁹ Khrushchev speaks of the 'cult of the individual', whereby Stalin acquired dictatorial powers from around 1934, but he characterises Stalin after 1937 as a 'despot'. Robert C. Tucker, Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov, for the period 1937–53, opt for the non-judgemental 'autocrat'.³⁰ Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov use the term 'tyrant'.³¹

Authoritarian rule embraces a wide range, and we need terms that reflect that range. The question of what these different terms mean is something that cannot be answered in any simple manner. The terminology itself needs to be refined in response to the detailed empirical research undertaken into the great authoritarian leaders of the twentieth century. That terminology can only be refined as part of a fuller comparative study that still remains to be undertaken.

The data now available allow us to place Stalin's leadership in its context, in terms of its relationship to the wider governing elite in the USSR, to explore in detail the nature of the leadership system, and to analyse the changing configuration of the political elite.³² We can now approach the question of the internal dynamics of this wider elite, their modes of operation, their value system and their codes of communication.³³ Stalin cannot be understood apart from the inner ruling circle in the USSR, nor apart from the wider circles of elites in the various branches of government (army, secret police, economic executives,

intellectuals and so on), and at the republican, city and regional level. Much remains to be done in this regard. The question of Stalin's relationship to mass opinion is only just being broached.³⁴

In considering the nature of authoritarian political leadership systems – whether the leader is designated as autocrat, dictator, despot, tyrant or whatever – the question of defining the features of such systems of rule remains. A simplistic definition which says that a dictator is one who decides everything, whose word is law, and who can act with total impunity, is inadequate. The processes of government – of policy formulation, resolution of policy options overseeing policy implementation – could never be performed by one individual, except in the simplest of societies. All rulers need subordinates through which they can govern; all are required to recognise limits to their powers and to act with regard to practicalities or prudence if they do not wish to bring about their own downfall. No ruler can ever decide everything alone. Some delegation of power is unavoidable. This is true of all the great dictators of the twentieth century – Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, Hitler, Benito Mussolini, General Francisco Franco and António Salazar.³⁵ The real question is the way in which such leaders manage their subordinates; the way that power is concentrated, without the leader being overburdened and overwhelmed with petty decisions; and without such over-centralisation crippling the functioning of the state.

In this volume, no attempt is made to arrive at any agreed position with regards to the nature of leadership politics under Stalin. The chapters represent the views of individual authors. Each chapter reflects a particular approach to the study of the topic, a particular way of conceptualising the nature of this leadership.

Evan Mawdsley concentrates on the nature of institutional representation within the Politburo and Central Committee; the 'job slot' principle, and examines the way in which the membership of these bodies changed over time. Stephen Wheatcroft looks at the informal processes of decision-making, examining the pattern of those attending the meetings in Stalin's private office from the 1920s up to 1952. He argues that these meetings were the real forum in which legislation was drafted. He emphasises the extent to which Stalin, almost to the end, operated as part of a collective group – Team-Stalin – although the composition of this group was largely determined by Stalin, until the last few years of his rule, when a more capricious and unpredictable element emerged in his leadership – when Stalin became a tyrant or adopted a more dictatorial style of rule.

R. W. Davies, Melanie Ilič and Oleg Khlevnyuk examine the extent to which Stalin involved himself in different fields of economic policy-making, and analyse the Stalin–Kaganovich correspondence to determine which issues Stalin dealt with and which he was content to leave to his subordinates. Derek Watson examines the formation of foreign policy in the 1930s, and the way Stalin played with various policy options, reflected in the rivalry between Litvinov and Molotov. Valery Vasil'ev examines the functioning of the Ukrainian Politburo and its relations to the all-union Politburo, as a way of understanding the way formal and informal relationships of power interacted.

E. A. Rees looks at the nature of the system of rule around Stalin, drawing on the data on meetings of the formal bodies of the party – Politburo, Secretariat and Orgburo – to demonstrate what he sees as the main shifts of power – the shift towards a system of personal dictatorship already by the early 1930s, and a shift to something qualitatively different after the Great Purges, which he equates with Khrushchev's definition of despotism. In both the dictatorial and despotic phases, Rees argues, Stalin remained dependent on his subordinates. This, he suggests, requires us to rethink the concepts of dictatorship and despotism, and to relate them to the realities of historical experience.

This work is intended as a contribution to the study of the decision-making process in the Stalinist era, and to the study of the evolution of the Soviet state. It complements two earlier volumes on decision-making within the central economic commissariats in the 1930s: E. A. Rees (ed.) *Decision-Making in the Stalinist Command Economy, 1932–1937* (Basingstoke/London and New York, 1997); and on decision-making at republican, city and regional level in E. A. Rees (ed.) *Centre–Local Relations in the Stalinist State, 1928–1941* (Basingstoke/London and New York, 2002).

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1

Stalin as Leader 1924–1937: From Oligarch to Dictator

E. A. Rees

Between Lenin's death in 1924 and the beginning of the Great Terror in 1936, the Soviet political system underwent a dramatic internal transformation. In this chapter we examine how the main institutions at the apex of the Communist Party and the Soviet government operated in this period, as reflected in the regularity of their meetings, the number of decrees and resolutions issued – and in terms of the personnel who headed them, and their interactions over time. The chapter explores the interrelationship between Stalin and his colleagues within the leading circles of power in the Soviet party–state structures. It focuses on the interaction of the informal and the formal structures of power. In this we seek to determine how Stalin ruled, the extent to which he exercised dictatorial power, and the way in which that power might have been constrained by the influence of subordinates and other institutional interests.

The party Politburo was in practice the supreme political authority. The governmental body, Sovnarkom, although constitutionally separate from the party, was in practice subordinate to the Politburo, although during Lenin's chairmanship it wielded considerable power in its own right.¹ But, from the outset, key institutions such as the secret policy apparatus of the Cheka, the Red Army and the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs reported directly to the Politburo.

Stalin rose to power in the years after Lenin's death through a series of power struggles by which he succeeded in gaining the support of one Politburo faction to defeat the other. In 1924, he succeeded in isolating Trotsky with his Left Oppositionist supporters in the Central Committee. In 1926/27, with the support of the Rightist in the Politburo, he defeated the Joint Opposition, in which Trotsky was now in alliance with Stalin's former allies, G. E. Zinoviev and L. B. Kamenev.

Finally, in 1928/29, Stalin, with the support of people whom he had advanced, turned against the Rightists – A. I. Rykov, N. I. Bukharin and M. P. Tomsky – and defeated them. These power struggles in the Politburo were also battles for the control of powerful party and state institutions.

Historians such as I. Deutscher, R. V. Daniels, T. H. Rigby and James Hughes emphasise Stalin's control over the central party Secretariat as the determining factor in creating a disciplined body of supporters in the power struggle following Lenin's death.² In this way, Stalin controlled the delegations which attended the party congresses, thereby controlling the debate, and more particularly the process of election of the Central Committee. This strategy had already been deployed by Lenin in 1921–22 in the wake of the damaging trade union debate and the controversy over the New Economic Policy (NEP) to limit the number of delegates who supported Trotsky that were elected to the X and XI party congresses.³

But Stalin's rise to power depended not only on the control of institutions and cadres; it also involved a strategy of constructing a coalition of forces, in part around policy questions. In his 'left turn' of 1928 against the NEP, Stalin challenged directly the governmental apparatus itself, Sonarkom/STO headed by Rykov, and the commissariats of Finance and Trade that had been the dominant institutions under NEP. Stalin's supporters in the governmental apparatus included – the radical economic planners in the State Planning Commission – Gosplan (G. M. Krzhizhanovskiy), the advocates of rapid industrialisation in the Supreme Council of the National Economy – Vesenkha (V. V. Kuibyshev), and agencies that might support him, such as the rail commissariat, but also key figures in the military establishment such as M. N. Tukhachevsky, who urged industrialisation as a defence priority. The shift from the NEP was achieved through the use of the joint agency of party and state control, the Central Control Commission and People's Commissariat of Workers' and Peasants' Inspection – TsKK-NKRKI (G. K. Ordzhonikidze), to lead the attack on those institutions most committed to its continuation, and to act as a policy think-tank generating alternative policy options and providing officials to staff the economic commissariats. The GPU's support in carrying through these policies was also essential.

The coalition was based on specific policy and ideological choices, as well as individual and institutional self-interest. The attack on N. A. Uglanov, first secretary of the Moscow party organisation in 1928, was a salutary warning to all party secretaries who might oppose the new line. Stalin also won over the mass organisations, successfully ousting

Tomsky as head of the trade union council – VTsSPS – and effecting a change in the leadership of the communist youth organisation, the Komsomol. Stalin combined ‘control from above’ with ‘control from below’,⁴ using the power of the central party–state apparatus from above and local initiative from below to attack entrenched institutional interests. The coalition was constructed around a series of campaigns – the ‘anti-kulak’ campaign of the winter of 1927–28; the Shakhty affair of 1928, and the campaign against the bourgeois specialists; the war scare of 1927; the Smolensk scandal and the attack on corruption in the regional party organisations; the self-criticism campaign and the drive to promote a new generation of specialists and proletarian cadres; and the drive to proletarianise the party’s ranks. These separate campaigns were co-ordinated into one unified campaign against the so-called ‘Right’ Opposition in 1928–29.

The Stalinist group’s power rested initially on the party apparatus itself. Stalin’s appointment as party General Secretary in 1922 was crucial to his success in the succession struggle after Lenin’s death. He controlled the central party institutions, the Orgburo and Secretariat, as well as the Department for Assignment (Orgraspred), which exercised great control over party appointments. These bodies were run for him effectively by V. M. Molotov until 1930, and thereafter by L. M. Kaganovich. In the period 1929–32, the enlarged meetings of the Politburo, Secretariat and Orgburo acted as councils of the Stalinist group, and of the coalition of institutional forces which it comprised.

The second major power base was the governmental apparatus. In December 1930, on Stalin’s insistence, Molotov became chairman of Sovnarkom and STO, in place of Rykov. This was to ensure close co-ordination between the Politburo and Sovnarkom, and to avoid the kinds of conflict that had arisen under the leadership of Rykov.⁵ The new joint Sovnarkom–Central Committee decrees issued after 1930 symbolised the new unity of party and state bodies. They were usually signed by Molotov and Stalin, with Molotov signing first as chairman of Sovnarkom. Notwithstanding the importance of these decisions, it was only on 5 June 1934 that the first of these decrees was presented to the Politburo for approval. In the second six months of 1934, nine were submitted for approval, and in 1935, 124.

The former Soviet ambassador, G. Bessedovsky, in his memoirs in 1930, spoke of the ruling circle as being dominated by a triumvirate of Stalin, Molotov and Kaganovich, with Stalin dominating these two very tough characters by sheer willpower, but also being highly dependent on them as aides and advisers. Both Molotov and Kaganovich were adept at

reading and anticipating Stalin's wishes.⁶ They were then seen as Stalin's most dependable agents, and as potential successors in case of necessity. They carried the huge burden of managing the twin engine of the party–government apparatus, relieving Stalin of much of the routine work. This triumvirate constituted the core members of the inner cabinet, to which others were added, often according to the issues under discussion.

Below these two central agencies of rule, the Stalinist group also controlled other powerful bodies. In the management of the economy they controlled Gosplan (headed by Kuibyshev), tied closely to Sovnarkom–STO, the major economic commissariat – Vesenkha (headed by Ordzhonikidze) and the lesser economic commissariats – of transport NKPS (headed by A. A. Andreev), and of agriculture – NKZem (headed by Ya. A. Yakovlev). Control over these commissariats was exercised by various agencies, the most important being that of party–state control TsKK–NKRKI. The specialist non-economic commissariats – internal security (G. G. Yagoda), defence (K. E. Voroshilov) and foreign affairs (M. M. Litvinov) were connected directly to the Politburo. Below these central structures of power, the ruling group dominated the leading regional and republican authorities in the country – Moscow (Kaganovich), Leningrad (S. M. Kirov) and Ukraine (S. V. Kosior).

By 1929 and the defeat of the Right, Stalin had succeeded in putting his own followers into the Politburo. It was at this time that the ban on factions within the party, proclaimed in 1921, became a reality, with the proclamation of the new doctrine of 'monolithic' party unity, and strict adherence to the party's 'general line'. This effectively marked the death of internal party democracy. The core of leaders formed around Stalin was shaped in the struggles with the Trotskyists and the Rightists, and tempered in the upheavals of the revolution from above. Stalin's relations with these figures were very different from his relations with the now defeated figures (Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky), who could talk to him on terms of equality. The new leaders were dependent on him for their elevation, and their attitude to him was one of respect and awe, but they were tough, ideologically hardened characters schooled in the revolutionary movement, the civil war and the revolution from above.

The central party bodies

The Politburo

From its creation in 1919, the Politburo had established itself as the supreme decision-making body in the ruling Communist Party. The

Politburo was formally elected by the party Central Committee and was answerable to the Central Committee and party congress. In truth, new members of the Politburo (as all other leading party bodies) were co-opted by the existing leaders. The Politburo in the 1920s acquired immense power and status, but its work was shrouded in mystery. After 1922, leadership of the Politburo became associated with the post of party General Secretary. The membership of the Politburo following the Central Committee plenum of 4 February 1932 was as shown in Table 1.1.

The ten full members and three candidate members reflected a particular system of representation at the highest level of the party. The heads of the main party and government institutions were always represented: the General Secretary of the party; the chairman of Sovnarkom, who by tradition acted as chairman when the Politburo met;⁷ and the chairman of TsIK USSR. In addition to the representatives of the central party administration (*apparat*), there were those of key local party bodies (Moscow, Leningrad and the Ukraine), the head of Gosplan and the heads of the key commissariats – Defence, Heavy Industry and Rail Transport. The chairman of the Central Control Commission (TsKK) was required during his term of office formally to surrender his membership of the Politburo, but he attended its meetings. (This system of representation is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.)

Table 1.1 The composition of the Politburo, ‘elected’ in February 1932

Members:	
I. V. Stalin	General Secretary
L. M. Kaganovich	Party Secretary, Secretary of Moscow party organisation
S. M. Kirov	Secretary of Leningrad party organisation
S. V. Kosior	Secretary of Ukrainian party organisation
V. M. Molotov	Chairman of Sovnarkom
V. V. Kuibyshev	Chairman of Gosplan
G. K. Ordzhonikidze	Narkom of NKTyazhProm
A. A. Andreev	Narkom of NKPS
K. E. Voroshilov	Narkom of NKVMDel
M. I. Kalinin	Chairman of TsIK USSR
Candidates:	
A. I. Mikoyan	Narkom of NKS nab
V. Ya. Chubar’	Chairman of Sovnarkom Ukraine SSR
G. I. Petrovskii	Chairman of TsIK Ukraine SSR

Source: Institute Zur Erforschung des Ud SSR, *Party and Government Officials of the Soviet Union 1917–1967* (Metuchen, 1969).

In the period up to the XVII party congress, those attending the formal meetings of the Politburo, besides Politburo members (full and candidate) but without voting rights, included members of the Central Committee and of the Presidium of the Central Control Commission (TsKK). A typical meeting on 28 March 1929 had in attendance 8 Politburo members, 3 Politburo candidate members, 22 Central Committee members, 11 Central Committee candidate members and 7 members of the presidium of TsKK.

The Politburo's protocols are not stenographic reports of the meetings (which apparently do not exist), and from them it is impossible to interpret the position taken by individuals in policy disputes. They list those attending, the agenda of the meeting, and decisions taken, often with the text of the resolutions appended at the end of the protocol. The protocols were signed by Stalin, and after 1930, in his absence, by Kaganovich as second secretary.

The Politburo concentrated on six main areas of policy: international affairs, defence, internal security, heavy industry, agriculture and transport. The protocols are least revealing regarding the first three, which tend to be dealt with in the secret files (*osoby papki*). Politburo decisions might be issued either as Central Committee resolutions, as joint Central Committee–Sovnarkom or government (TsIK, Sovnarkom or STO) decrees, or even as orders (*prikazy*) of a particular commissariat. The protocols record the confirmation of many appointments, most of which had initially been processed by the Orgburo, and here the huge scale of *nomenklatura* becomes apparent.

Even regular meetings of the Politburo from 1924 to 1930 did not guarantee collective decision-making. Already, under Lenin, Molotov asserts, a leading group largely determined Politburo policy.⁸ Trotsky in 1923–25 complained that key decisions were taken prior to formal Politburo meetings, and that he was excluded from these deliberations.⁹ Boris Bazhanov, Stalin's secretary, recounts how in 1924/5 the Stalin, Zinoviev, Kamenev troika decided key issues on the Politburo's agenda in meetings in Stalin's office beforehand.¹⁰ Kamenev complained at the XIV party congress in 1925 that power was concentrated increasingly in Stalin's hands as General Secretary.¹¹ Again, in the struggle with the Joint Opposition in 1926–27, Stalin relied on a leading group to prepare the Politburo sessions in advance.¹² In 1928, the 'Right' opposition were out-manoeuvred in the Politburo by Stalin's ruse, as General Secretary, to accord casting votes to members of the presidium of the Central Control Commission (TsKK).¹³ S. I. Syrtsov, newly 'elected' as candidate member of the Politburo in June 1929, complained that the

Politburo as a collective decision-making body was a fiction, with certain members, including Kuibyshev, Ya. E. Rudzutak and M. I. Kalinin, regularly being excluded from its deliberations.¹⁴

In the period 1923 to 1927, the weakness of the Politburo, however, should not be exaggerated, it met on a very regular basis.¹⁵ The total number of formal sessions each year are listed below:

1923	80
1924	75
1925	55
1926	71
1927	75

From January 1928 until September 1929, the Politburo met every week, usually on a Thursday. Thereafter, the formal meetings became less

Table 1.2 Formal sessions of the Politburo, 1928–1940

Year	Central Committee plenums	Politburo meetings		
		Number of protocols	Number of meetings	Stalin's attendance
1928	3	53	53	51
1929	2	51	51	49
1930	1	39	40	27
1931	2	59	37	31
1932	1	46	30	24
1933	1	24	24	17
1934	2	20	18	14
1935	3	17	16	14
1936	2	9	9	7
1937	3	12	6	6
1938	1	11	4	4
1939	1	14	2	2
1940	2	14	2	2

Source: Protocols of the Politburo RGASPI, 17/3/667-1031. O. V. Khlevnyuk, A. V. Kvashonkin, L. P. Kosheleva, L. A. Rogovaya (eds), *Stalinskoe Politbyuro v 30-e gody: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1995), which lists the sessions of the Politburo from 1930 to 1940.

Note: For 1931, *Stalinskoe Politbyuro* lists 61 formal Politburo sessions. This, however, is misleading, as 24 of those sessions were working sessions (of which Stalin attended 16). For 1932, it lists 47 sessions of the Politburo, but only 30 were formal sessions and 17 were working sessions (of which Stalin attended 11). *Stalinskoe Politbyuro* does not list any working sessions for 1930, but the list of working sessions can be constructed for the period 1928–1930 from *Politbyuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povestki dnya zasedanii: Tom I 1919–1929, Katalog* (Moscow, 2000) and *Politbyuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povestki dnya zasedanii: Tom II 1930–1939, Katalog* (Moscow, 2001). In 1933, the practice of convening working sessions of the Politburo, according to the listing given in *Stalinskoe Politbyuro*, stopped.

regular, with the dates of subsequent meetings being fixed by the Politburo. There was a notable decline of these formal meetings in 1930. The decline of formal meetings (as we shall see) was compensated by an increase in working sessions of the Politburo. The main change in the Politburo's power and status came in 1933.¹⁶

Through 1931, the Politburo met in formal session regularly on the 5th, 15th and 25th of each month. In 1933, the pattern changed with the Agenda (*povestki dnya*) listing just twenty-four formal sessions for the whole year; the pattern was most commonly for two sessions a month, usually on the 1st and 15th (see Table 1.2). A Politburo resolution of 23 April 1933 ruling that its sessions were to be held on the 5th, 15th and 25th of each month referred to past practice and was not implemented.¹⁷ From September 1934, the principle of monthly meetings was established, with occasional additional meetings. However, in 1936, no meetings were held in January, August or November.

In the period up to 1932, Stalin and other leaders devoted much time to the work of the formal and working sessions of the Politburo. After 1933 the Politburo was transformed into a consultative body, rather than a collective decision-making institution. Molotov, in his memoirs, justified this violation of democratic procedures, which he acknowledged might have produced more considered legislation, by the advantages of swift resolution of problems.¹⁸

Politburo decision-making

Here we shall explore the changes over time in the kinds of decisions taken in the Politburo's name as reflected in its daily agenda. The vast number of decisions taken reflected the highly centralised nature of the decision-making process. Assessing the relative significance of different decisions is difficult (many of them were of a routine, administrative nature, while substantive changes in domestic and foreign policy do not register as single decisions of the Politburo at all).

Here we offer a broad overview of the data. In this a distinction is drawn between three types of decision: (i) those approved at the Politburo's formal sessions; (ii) those taken by the Politburo (*reshenie Politburo*) either in working sessions or by specially empowered commissions; and (iii) those decisions taken by polling the Politburo members (*oprosom*). We shall examine the numbers of these three types of decision from the years 1923 to 1940 (see Table 1.3). This table illustrates graphically the Politburo's demise. If, in 1923, 88 per cent of all decisions taken by the Politburo were approved at a formal Politburo

Table 1.3 Politburo decisions, 1923–1940

	Decisions of sessions of the Politburo	Decisions of the Politburo	Decisions taken by <i>oprosom</i>	All decisions
1923	1487 (80 sess)	2	208	1697
1924	1407 (75 sess)	0	760	2167
1925	1149 (54 sess)	0	799	1948
1926	1359 (71 sess)	0	654	2013
1927	1110 (75 sess)	0	695	1805
1928	961 (53 sess)	141	782	1884
1929	1070 (51 sess)	558	648	2276
1930	1093 (40 sess)	972	826	2891
1931	1443 (51 sess)	810	1665	3918
1932	1446 (47sess)	154	2137	3737
1933	444 (24 sess)	32	2874	3350
1934	290 (17 sess)	102	3498	3890
1935	105 (16 sess)	7	3467	3579
1936	88 (9sess)	0	3212	3300
1937	23 (7 ses)	2236	1314	3573
1938	27 (4 ses)	2111	278	2401
1939	4 (2 sess)	2717	34	2755
1940	13 (2 sess)	3502	0	3515

Source: *Polityuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povevski dnya zasedanii: Tom I 1919–1929, Katalog* (Moscow, 2000); *Polityuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povevski dnya zasedanii: Tom II 1930–1939, Katalog* (Moscow, 2001); *Polityuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povevski dnya zasedanii: Tom III 1940–1952, Katalog* (Moscow, 2001). See also the data given by Wheatcroft in Table 3.3, p. 88.

session, by 1932 this was down to 39 per cent, and then fell to 13 per cent in 1933. By 1937, only 0.6 per cent of all Politburo decisions were approved at formal Politburo sessions.

Table 1.3 allows us to identify four distinct phases in the Politburo's development. The first was up to August 1928, when the formal Politburo session was the main forum of decision-making. A substantial number of decisions was also taken by polling the members (*oprosom*) between sessions. The Politburo members invested an enormous amount of time and effort in the formal sessions of the Politburo, which met every four or five days. This, as noted, did not mean that on key political issues decisions might not also be taken prior to the session or behind the scenes by cabal. But these meetings were certainly not merely ceremonial.

The second phase, from 1928 to 1932, reveals new and unexpected aspects to the operation of the Politburo. In August 1928 an important innovation was introduced in the issuing of decisions (*resheniya*) of the Politburo. This practice was followed throughout 1929. In 1930, formal

Politburo meetings, with some irregularities, met on the 5th, 15th and 25th of each month. Between these formal Politburo meetings, working sessions of the Politburo were convened on the 10th, 20th and 30th of most months, when batches of Politburo decisions were issued (see Table 1.4). The number of such decisions issued on any single day could be as high as forty-seven, and was on average about twenty. A large number of decisions by *oprosom* were taken on the days of the formal and working meetings of the Politburo, either to clear up decisions in advance of the meeting, or to deal with matters it had not been possible to resolve at the meeting itself.

These closed working sessions were intended to expedite and process the growing work of the Politburo. The practice seems to have been similar to the formal sessions, in terms of the number and range of issues handled, as well as in terms of procedures, with proposals brought by individual members of the Politburo, high-ranking party secretaries or commissars for approval. The working sessions were attended by Politburo members and candidate members, a handful of Central Committee members and members of the presidium TsKK. In 1931, average attendance at these sessions was seventeen. Stalin always attended these working sessions when he was in Moscow. (see Table 4.1)

Table 1.4 Formal and working sessions of the Politburo, 1927–1931

	Formal sessions	Working sessions	Formal and working sessions	Issuing of decisions
1927	75	0	75	1
1928	53	20	73	0
1929	51	54	105	0
1930	40	35	75	6
1931	37	36	73	16
1932	30	17	47	27
1933	24	0	24	10
1934	18	0	18	24

Source: O. V. Khlevnyuk, A. V. Kvashonkin, L. P. Kosheleva, L. A. Rogovaya (eds), *Stalinskoe Politbyuro v 30-e gody: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1995); *Politbyuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povestki dnya zasedanii: Tom I 1919–1929, Katalog* (Moscow, 2000); *Politbyuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povestki dnya zasedanii: Tom II 1930–1939, Katalog* (Moscow, 2001).

Note: The calculation of the number of sessions is by no means straightforward. For 1931, *Stalinskoe Politbyuro* lists 43 formal sessions, but 4 of these were almost certainly working sessions. For 1931, *Povestki dnya zasedanii* shows that decisions of the Politburo were issued on 52 days. Of these, we estimate (by regularity of dates and numbers of decisions taken) that 36 were working sessions of the Politburo and that the remaining 16 (involving one or two decisions) were probably issued by Politburo commissions.

for numbers of working sessions). Most of the decisions of the Politburo (*resheniya Politburo*) during 1928–32 were taken in these working sessions of the Politburo.

In addition to the formal sessions and the working sessions of the Politburo there were the days on which decisions of the Politburo were issued. These decisions may have emanated from Politburo commissions, empowered as drafting commissions in advance by the Politburo. Some of these decisions almost certainly came from working sessions of the Politburo that are not listed in the protocols as given in *Stalinskoe Politbyuro*.¹⁹ The issuing of Politburo decisions was increased in June–August 1932, during the growing crisis in agriculture. From 1932 to 1935, the practice was followed sporadically, with often only single decisions being issued. By 1936, it had stopped completely.

The third phase was from 1933 to 1937. The working sessions of the Politburo ceased in 1932 and in 1933 there was a significant decline in the number of formal sessions of the Politburo. The big increase in the number of issues decided by *oprosom* partly reflects the greater number of decisions handled by Politburo standing and *ad hoc* commissions, and by the apparatus of the Orgburo and Secretariat. The increased use of Politburo commissions was an innovation associated with Kaganovich, who managed the Politburo for Stalin, and who personally played a very active role in these commissions. This, it might be argued, facilitated speed and more specialist involvement in policy-making but at the expense of the Politburo's collective identity.

The fourth phase was the period 1938 to 1940. This saw the final demise of formal meetings of the Politburo, with the establishment in 1937 of two commissions of the Politburo charged with taking decisions on domestic policy and foreign policy. Decisions were no longer referred to individual Politburo members by *oprosom* but were decided largely by this select inner group and simply reported as a 'decision of the Politburo'.

This pattern of decision-making raises profound questions with regard to the functioning of the Politburo. With reference to the formal sessions of the Politburo, we note a dramatic decline in their frequency. If we calculate the number of agenda items approved at formal Politburo sessions for set years, the decline is seen to be even more precipitous (see Table 1.5).

The vast numbers of questions taken by polling (*oprosom*), between 1000 and 3000 per annum, a very large proportion of which were trivial, raises questions as to how effective a part Politburo members, overburdened with departmental responsibilities, could play in decision-making.

Table 1.5 Number of Politburo formal sessions and number of agenda items approved, 1923–1939

Year	Formal sessions	Total number agenda items	Average per session
1923	80	1 487	18.5
1929	55	1 107	20.1
1934	18	285	15.8
1936	9	88	9.7
1939	2	6	3.0

Source: *Politbyuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povestki dnya zasedanii: Tom I 1919–1929, Katalog* (Moscow, 2000); *Politbyuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povestki dnya zasedanii: Tom II 1930–1939, Katalog* (Moscow, 2001).

This left little time for individuals to confer with one another. This was supposed to allow Politburo members to register their dissent about a course of policy proposed and to have the matter discussed in the Politburo. We do not know whether this was simply a token right, or whether members in fact used this power. It is difficult to avoid the inference that this reflected the substitution of politics by administration, and was a cover to conceal the great diminution of the real influence of Politburo members. What we see, as in other authoritarian institutions that seek to conceal their nature, is the well-known phenomenon of ‘pseudo-consultation’.

The frequency with which formal meetings of the Politburo were held declined sharply from the beginning of 1933. As a result, the volume of work to be completed at each session grew enormously, and the sessions themselves were able to get through only a small part of the agenda.

The Politburo’s decline is also marked by other indicative trends. In 1923–27, foreign policy matters were very often placed at the top of the Politburo’s agenda. In 1926, for example, there were 74 formal sessions of the Politburo, and at 46 of these sessions a special place on the agenda was reserved for questions by NKInDel (*Voprosy NKInDel*). But this practice had ceased as early as 1928 (see Chapter 6, p. 136).²⁰

The Orgburo and Secretariat

The Orgburo and Secretariat of the Communist Party were established in March 1919 as bodies of equal power with the Politburo.²¹ The Politburo quickly gained ascendancy over the Orgburo, regularly confirming Orgburo resolutions, and examining the protests against decisions of the Ogburo.²²

The Secretariat served as the executive arm of the Politburo and Orgburo, being responsible for preparing the sessions of the Politburo and Orgburo and overseeing the fulfilment of its resolutions. From March 1921, the Secretariat also acted in the capacity as the collegium secretariat of the Central Committee and resolved independently a number of questions (above all related to cadres).

Stalin, from his election as General Secretary in 1922, controlled the Orgburo and Secretariat, which provided him with his real power base in the central party apparatus. From 1929 onwards he ceased to attend the formal meetings of these bodies, delegating the task to his deputies. The Orgburo was led by the second secretary of the Central Committee (although formally such a post did not exist). In the 1920s, this role was performed by Molotov. On Molotov's appointment as chairman of Sovnarkom in December 1930, the function was taken over by Kaganovich.

From a situation in the 1920s when there were almost weekly meetings of both Secretariat and Orgburo, there was a significant decline from 1933 onwards. Formal sessions of the Secretariat practically ceased, but the Orgburo from 1933 to 1940, with the exception of 1937, continued to meet on average once a month (see Table 1.6). When formal sessions did not take place, protocols were still issued for both bodies, recording decisions that had been taken through polling (*oprosom*) of their members.²³ Formal sessions of both Orgburo and Secretariat were attended by the members of these bodies, and by members of the Politburo, the Central Committee and the party control bodies. An attendance of some forty members was normal, but in some cases as many as sixty-five are listed as having attended.

The Orgburo, which was elected in February 1934 after the XVII party congress, comprised the members as shown in Table 1.7. The Orgburo between 1930 and 1934 was led by Kaganovich, and during his absence A. A. Zhdanov deputised. With Kaganovich's appointment to head NKPS in February 1935 there were some changes in the organisation of the central party apparatus. Kaganovich retained his posts as party Secretary and continued to organise the Politburo's work, as shown by his correspondence with Stalin during the latter's extended vacations. But Andreev was transferred from NKPS to the party Secretariat and took over the Orgburo, Zhdanov took charge of culture and propaganda, and N. I. Ezhov retained responsibility for industry but was also appointed chairman of KPK a post previously held by Kaganovich. G. M. Malenkov was in charge of cadres at the CC's department of leading party organs (ORPO).

Table 1.6 Formal sessions of the Secretariat and Orgburo, 1928–40

Year	Number of protocols	Number of meetings: Orgburo	Number of meetings: Secretariat	Meetings attended by Stalin
1928	87	44	43	13
1929	85	44	41	1
1930	61	32	29	0
1931	59	29	28	0
1932	49	17	32	0
1933	23	12	7	0
1934	20	12	1	0
1935	23	12	1	1
1936	21	13	0	0
1937	13	6	0	0
1938	18	11	0	0
1939	32	14	0	0
1940	42	14	0	0

Source: Protocols of the Orgburo and Secretariat RGASPI, 17/113/600 to 17/114/40.

Table 1.7 Membership of the Orgburo, February 1934

Secretaries of CC	L. M. Kaganovich I. V. Stalin A. A. Zhdanov S. M. Kirov
Vice chairman of Sovnarkom	V. V. Kuibyshev
Head of the Political Dept of the Red Army	Ya. B. Garmnik
Section Heads CC	N. I. Ezhov A. I. Stetskii
Secretary of the Komsomol	A. V. Kosarev
Chairman VTSPS	N. M. Shvernik

Source: *Party and Government Officials of the Soviet Union 1917–1967* (Metuchen, 1969).

The Orgburo concerned itself with the appointment of leading officials. It led internal party campaigns such as the exchange and checking of party documents, monitored the party membership, and ensured central control over local party bodies. The Central Committees of republican party bodies, obkoms, kraikoms, and gorkoms were required to report periodically to the Orgburo. In 1934–36 this was done rather spasmodically, with four to six sessions each year being in part taken up

with such reports. The Orgburo also focused on party organisational and propaganda work, monitoring the implementation of Central Committee resolutions on these matters. In some cases, investigations were triggered by reports from ORPO. In 1934 and 1935, the Politburo approved about 300 decisions of the Orgburo each year, rising in 1936 to almost 400.²⁴ The Orgburo, in effect, worked as a permanent acting commission of the Politburo.

The XVI party congress in 1930 elected a Secretariat of five members (K. Ya. Bauman, Kaganovich, Molotov, P. P. Postyshev and Stalin) and two candidates (I. M. Moskvina and N. M. Shvernik). Decisions of the Secretariat were rarely referred to the Politburo, but were approved by the Orgburo. The Secretariat on occasion prepared questions for examination by the Politburo, and was empowered to resolve a number of questions in the Politburo's name. The Secretariat's primary responsibility lay in overseeing cadres' appointments and in exercising oversight over local party organisations.²⁵ On 30 April 1931, at Stalin's proposal, the Secretariat was charged, jointly with Molotov (chairman of Sovnarkom USSR), 'henceforth to resolve current questions on the requests of the localities and only in cases of special importance to refer them to the Politburo'.²⁶

The Central Committee apparatus

The steady demise of the formal meetings of the Politburo, Orgburo and the Secretariat did not mean that the organisational apparatus of the central party machine ceased to function. On the contrary, these institutions continued to play a vital role within the system of administration: issuing instructions on policy implementation and monitoring policy performance. The Secretariat led the departments of the Central Committee directly. The structure and organisation of the departments changed over time. At the beginning of 1930, the following departments were created: culture and propaganda, organisation-instruction; assignment of administrative-economic and trade union cadres; and agitation and mass campaigns. The Lenin Institute also had the status of a department of the Central Committee.²⁷

In the middle of 1934, the Central Committee departments (*otdely*) were restructured, primarily with the aim of providing closer party supervision over the main economic commissariats, and over the republican and regional party bodies. The following departments were set up: culture and propaganda; industry; transport; agriculture; planning-finance-trade; political-administrative; and leading party organs. The departments concentrated mainly on cadres' questions

and control over policy implementation. The departments also prepared materials for the Politburo and initiated questions for its examination.

The Politburo on 10 March 1934 assigned responsibility for these departments as follows: Transport Sector – Kaganovich (with Zhdanov as deputy); Industrial Sector – Ezhov; Agricultural Sector – Zhdanov; Culture–Propaganda Sector – A. I. Stetskii; Leading Party Organs (responsible for oversight of the local party bodies) – D. A. Bulatov; the Special Sector – A. N. Poskrebyshv; and Administrative Affairs of the Central Committee – Ya. E. Brezanovskii.²⁸

On 4 June 1934, the Politburo approved the division of responsibility between the three party Secretaries: Stalin – Culture–Propaganda, the Special Sector, and the work of the Politburo; Kaganovich – Orgburo, the Industrial Sector, the Transport Sector, the Komsomol and Party Control; and Zhdanov – Secretariat, the Agricultural Sector, the Planning–Finance–Trade Sector, Political Administration, the Sector of Leading Party Organs and Administrative Affairs.²⁹

In periods of crisis, the commissariats were subject to close scrutiny by Politburo commissions and by the Central Committee departments. The power of these departments varied considerably. The Central Committee's sector for industry in no way competed with Vesenkha/NKTyazhProm which was the dominant voice in industry, with Ordzhonikidze its head, a leading figure in the Politburo. But Ezhov, head of the industrial sector, remained a thorn in the flesh of NKTyazhProm by exposing mismanagement in industry. M. A. Chernov, head of the agricultural sector, took over NKZem USSR in 1934 and its former head, Yakovlev, was transferred to head the agricultural sector. In 1935, Kaganovich, who as head of the transport sector had waged a campaign of criticism against NKPS, became head of NKPS.

The influence of these departments on policy-making is difficult to assess, as these archival files were destroyed in 1941. The Politburo's protocols provide no indication of what legislation or decisions emanated from advice offered by the Central Committee departments. Some indication of their influence can be gleaned from the preparatory materials to the resolutions of the Politburo. Most of these archival files are housed in the archives of the Politburo (the present Presidential Archive of the Russian Federation), which remain at the time of writing closed to researchers. The departments carried out investigations, worked with letters, prepared documents for the Politburo, and worked on the assignment of leading cadres.

The governmental apparatus

From 1917, the party effectively dominated the state institutions. The Central Executive Committee (TsIK) of the All-Union Congress of Soviets had a legislative function constitutionally. It was used to confer legitimacy on policy decisions that emanated from the party-governmental apparatus. The discussion of the budget through TsIK's Budget Commission offered a façade of consultation.

The main lines of authority, however, connected Sovnarkom with the Politburo. Sovnarkom concentrated on economic, and to a certain extent, social, administration. In addition, although there were commissars for foreign affairs, defence, and from 1934 internal affairs (including security), Sovnarkom was bypassed, and the Politburo dealt with these matters directly. Neither Litvinov, narkom of NKInDel, nor Yagoda, narkom of NKVD, were Politburo members, but they participated regularly in its sessions. The heads of the key economic commissariats (Kuibyshev, Ordzhonikidze, Mikoyan, and later Kaganovich) were leading members of the Politburo, demonstrating the primacy of economic affairs in politics for at least the first half of the 1930s.³⁰

The Politburo exercised tight control over Sovnarkom. Molotov, as chairman, would still seek approval for 'sensitive' agendas and items.³¹ The Sovnarkom approved by the VI Congress of Soviet on 18 March 1931 consisted of fifteen members including the chairman, deputy chairmen and commissars; as detailed in Table 1.8. The deputy chairmen played an important role, alongside the chairman; Andreev headed the control agency NKRKI, Kuibyshev headed Gosplan, while Rudzutak (without portfolio) provided support to Molotov.

The Politburo appointed the commissars, deputy commissars, members of the collegia, and their positions were confirmed by a decree of the presidium TsIK or Sovnarkom. The formal meetings of Sovnarkom were phased with those of the Politburo and Orgburo. The *protokoly* show that at the 34 meetings of Sovnarkom held in 1931³² the numbers attending varied between twenty-one and forty-six. Voting members might be supplemented by 'consultative' members with a right to speak, but not to vote.

Sovnarkom's chief concern with economic planning was in implementing the annual and quarterly plans. Gosplan drew up the details of the Second Five-Year Plan, within the framework laid down by the party, in consultation with the commissariats. Sovnarkom tended to become overloaded with petty business, and much was shunted off to *ad hoc* sub-committees and other bodies. The Politburo gave general policy

Table 1.8 Membership of Sovnarkom, March 1931

V. M. Molotov	Chairman
Ya. E. Rudzutak	Deputy chairman
A. A. Andreev	Narkom of NKRKI and <i>ex officio</i> deputy chair
N. K. Antipov	Narkom of NKPT
G. F. Grin'ko	Narkom of NKFin
V. V. Kuibyshev	Chairman of Gosplan and <i>ex officio</i> deputy chair
M. M. Litvinov	Narkom of NKInDel
A. I. Mikoyan	Narkom of NKSnab
G. K. Ordzhonikidze	Chairman of Vesenkha
A. P. Rozen'golts	Narkom of NKVneshTorg
M. L. Rukhimovich	Narkom of NKPS
A. M. Tsikhon	Narkom of NKTrud
K. E. Voroshilov	Narkom of NKVMDel
Ya. A. Yakovlev	Narkom of NKZem
N. M. Yanson	Narkom of NKVodTrans

Source: *Sobranie zakonov i rasporyazhenie raboche-krest'yanskogo pravitel'stva SSSR, 1931, Part II, 5–59.*

directives, but it was also a court of final appeal in inter-departmental disputes. Within Sovnarkom, under Molotov's leadership, the deputy chairmen were assigned responsibility for overseeing the work of different commissariats, and state commissions and committees. Molotov, in a letter to Mikoyan dated 13 May 1934, outlined the particular institutions for which his three deputies were to be responsible.³³ These were as follows:

- V. V. Kuibyshev: NKIndel, NKVMDel, OGPU, NKVneshtorg and the Currency Commission, NKSnab, Tsentrosoyuz, KomZag, NKZem and NKSovkhoz.
- V. Ya. Chubar': NKTyazhProm, NKLegProm, NKLes, NKFin, Gosbank, NKPS, NKVodTrans, NKSvyaz and the Chief Administration for Cinema and Photographic Industry.
- V. I. Mezhlauk: Gosplan, cultural and social affairs (including NKPros RSFSR and NKZdrav RSFSR), the Standards Committee and the Radiofication Committee.

Kuibyshev's death in January 1935 created immediate problems in the running of Sovnarkom and deprived Molotov of a staunch ally. To overcome the difficulties, Chubar' succeeded Kuibyshev as first vice-chairman; N. K. Antipov succeeded Kuibyshev as chairman of the Commission of Soviet Control and as a vice-chairman; while Rudzutak continued as a vice-chairman without ministerial portfolio.³⁴

Table 1.9 Membership of STO, December 1930

V. M. Molotov	Chairman
A. A. Andreev	Deputy chairman (<i>ex officio</i> as Sovnarkom)
V. V. Kuibyshev	Deputy chairman (Chairman of Gosplan)
Ya. E. Rudzutak	Deputy chairman
G. F. Grin'ko	Narkom of NKFin
M. I. Kalmanovich	Chairman of State Bank
A. I. Mikoyan	Narkom of NKSnab
G. K. Ordzhonikidze	Chairman of Vesenkha
I. V. Stalin	Party General Secretary
K. E. Voroshilov	Narkom of NKVMDel
Ya. E. Yakovlev	Narkom of NKZem

Source: *Party and Government Officials of the Soviet Union 1917–1967* (Metuchen, 1969).

Alongside Sovnarkom there was STO. The membership of STO in December 1930 was as shown in Table 1.9. The leadership of Sovnarkom and STO were thus identical. Although Stalin was a member of STO he rarely attended its meetings. He attended a joint Sovnarkom–STO session in January 1931 concerned with the Five-Year Plan. In the mid-1930s, STO's position was eroded by Gosplan and the industrial commissariats. Sovnarkom and STO had their own commissions and committees. Gosplan and STO had special responsibility for co-ordinating the work of the economic commissariats.

One of the major committees of STO, and from 1933 of Sovnarkom, was the Committee for Agricultural Procurement (KomZag). It was headed initially by Kuibyshev and had responsibility for setting procurement targets for all the regions of the USSR. Stalin had a keen interest in this work, and revisions of the targets could not be made without his express approval. Adjustments to the targets at the behest of republican and oblast authorities had to receive Stalin's sanction.

Managing the party–state apparatus

Sovnarkom's Commission of Implementation (*Komissiya ispolneniya* or KomIspol), was set up on Stalin's initiative in December 1930; with Molotov as *ex officio* chair, and charged with enforcing policy implementation.³⁵ Sovnarkom's work in controlling the economic commissariats was assisted by Gosplan, the Commissariat of Finance (NKFin), the State Bank (Gosbank) and the statistical agency TsUNKhU, who all performed a control regulating function, through the levers of planning, finance and credit.

The XVII party congress abolished TsKK–NKRKI and Sovnarkom's Commission of Implementation; in their place it established a new Commission of Party Control (KPK), headed by Kaganovich and a new Commission of Soviet Control (KSK), headed by Kuibyshev. Members of the bureaux of KPK and KSK were granted the same rights as those previously enjoyed by members of TsKK's presidium. They were entitled 'without restriction' (*bez ogranicheniya*) to attend Politburo meetings, and ordinary members of both bodies were allowed to be present on matters relating directly to their areas of responsibility.³⁶ In 1935, Ezhov headed KPK, and N. K. Antipov headed KSK, both of these bodies being charged with policy enforcement.

Alongside these agencies were bodies with a more punitive role – especially the NKVD, the Procuracy and the Supreme Court. Certain sections of the economy, notably the commissariats of transport and water transport, were allocated their own Procuracy and Courts.³⁷

The Politburo, through the Orgburo's apparatus, monitored closely the fulfillment of its directives and orders.³⁸ The central party apparatus supervised the commissariats, and the republican and regional administrative bodies. They operated through their staff of instructors and inspectors, with powers to carry out investigations, request materials and documents, interview officials, issue instructions on how policy was to be implemented and interpreted, and submit reports to higher party organs.³⁹ The Orgburo and Secretariat controlled appointments of government officials through the *nomenklatura* system, and through contact with the party cells in the commissariats.

The party Secretariat's influence over the economic commissariats was strengthened with the creation in 1933 of Political Administrations in NKZem, NKSovkhoz, NKPS and NKVodTrans. These were responsible for administering the political departments (*politotdely*) in these fields. This provided a parallel line of authority within the commissariats to the line administrators. This system of administrative control was modelled on that developed during the civil war, and was directly analogous to the system of party control over the armed forces. The *politotdely* were staffed largely by officials drafted in from the Red Army and GPU. The Political Administrations answered directly to the Secretariat and Orgburo.

Politburo commissions and joint Politburo–Sovnarkom commissions played a key role in decision-making and in drafting legislation. In some cases, these were permanent bodies, such as the Defence Commission and, after August 1933, the Transport Commission. The Commission for Hard Currency (*valyuta*) played a key role in shaping the country's

foreign trade policy. There were also *ad hoc* commissions that were set up on a regular basis.

The commissars (narkoms) were responsible for their own departments and, through a system of ministerial responsibility, for regulating department work. The Soviet political system after 1928 was a control-dominated system. As always, excessive control produced a plethora of evasion strategies by subordinates, which inevitably produced still more controls.⁴⁰

Stalin: from oligarch to dictator

The 'cult' around Stalin as *vozhd'* which developed after 1929 conferred on him immunity from criticism, as witnessed by the retreat from collectivisation heralded by Stalin's article 'Dizzy with Success' and the handling of the famine in 1933. In each case, responsibility for policy failure was unloaded on to lower-level officials. Officials consequently sought assiduously to interpret Stalin's will, and to anticipate his orders. At party gatherings, Stalin's pronouncements tended to be very low-key; hints and suggestions were enough to produce the desired effect. At the XVII party congress in 1934, Stalin's apparent mild rebukes to Yakovlev (NKZem), Andreev (NKPS) and Yanson (NKVodTrans) unleashed a storm of denunciations from other delegates. This typified his method of leadership. The new authoritarian style of leadership was reflected in the 'cults' that developed around the other satellite leaders.

Stalin's personal dictatorship was consolidated in 1929–33. It developed in part in response to the stresses within the coalition of individual and institutional interests that made up the ruling Stalinist group. The forced retreat on collectivisation in 1930, heralded by 'Dizzy with Success', brought the first major strain within that coalition. Stalin's attempt to unload responsibility for the crisis on to republican, regional and local leaders was deeply resented. Lower-level officials tended to favour a more aggressive policy in enforcing collectivisation. The Syrtsov–Lominadze affair of 1930 offers further testimony of dissatisfaction within the Stalinist coalition, reflecting a more moderate tendency, which desired a more cautious, gradualist approach.⁴¹

The second major crisis within the ruling coalition came in 1932–33 with the famine. This was largely a product of the impact of collectivisation, 'dekulakisation', the reckless pursuit of high procurement targets for grain, and the failure to build up reserve stocks in anticipation of such harvest failure. The famine produced a major crisis in the regime's relations with the peasantry, but also with the urban population. Having

amassed unprecedented power, Stalin in 1932–33 was also held responsible for the catastrophe. Here we have an interesting paradox: while his power increased, his personal authority suffered a major blow. But whereas in the past criticism was openly voiced, now it was done covertly by secret platforms circulating in the party, notably the Eismont–Smirnov–Tolmachev and the Ryutin platforms. The latter denounced Stalin and his policies from a ‘Leninist’ perspective, condemning the new dictatorship and demanding Stalin’s removal.⁴² But by 1932 there was no effective constitutional mechanism by which Stalin could be brought to account.

The move towards a system of personal dictatorship was facilitated by the combination of internal crisis and external threat. The decline of formal meetings of the Politburo dates from January 1933, precisely when the scale of the famine crisis was becoming apparent. The situation was compounded by the dangers posed to the USSR externally, following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in September 1931 and Hitler’s advent to power as Chancellor in Germany in January 1933.

The system of formal meetings of the Politburo, Secretariat and Orgburo were too large and unwieldy to exercise an effective decision-making role, and something more streamlined was required. In the early 1930s, as the number of decisions referred to the Politburo increased, efforts were made to restrict agenda items to a manageable number, to confine the time given to the presentation of individual items, and to pass routine decisions for resolution in the Secretariat.

But the way the system was changed involved a significant shift in the locus of power. The long-established practice of expounding and justifying policy before an extended party forum, a central feature of ‘democratic centralism’ from the Lenin era, was abandoned. The rude exclusion of senior party officials from such forums must have had a telling impact on the way these officials viewed their relations with Stalin. The political regime within the party was tightened up, and in 1933 a major purge of the party ranks was instituted.

The demise of the formal meetings of the Politburo, Secretariat and Orgburo, which had functioned as the inner councils of the ruling Stalinist coalition, meant an end to the system of oligarchic rule: the mechanisms of collective leadership and collective accountability were eroded, but the trapping of that system survived. There was no real forum in which policies could be challenged, whereby the leadership could be brought to account, censured or removed. The Central Committee had been emasculated by the late 1920s; it met infrequently and its debates were cursory. Its membership was subject to a high

turnover in 1934, and again in 1937. The conditions for a system of personal dictatorship had been established.

The hub of this system of personal dictatorship were the meetings held in Stalin's private office in the Kremlin. Such meetings dated back to the 1920s and had been convened alongside the formal weekly meetings of the Politburo, Orgburo and Secretariat. Through these private meetings Stalin was given much greater control over the political agenda, to determine which issues were to be aired, and which officials to be summoned.

We know little about the way in which these meetings were conducted, the procedures by which individuals were summoned, or how far briefings, position papers or draft resolutions were prepared in advance. The frequency of the meetings and the high standing of the officials who attended them, however, indicate an enormous simplification, even streamlining, of the decision-making process. It gave Stalin great oversight over the work of the party-state apparatus, with leading officials being required to report on and account for their activities, and it also gave him direct access to leading officials at different levels of the hierarchy, thus providing him with innumerable channels of communication.

The shift of power to Stalin's private office brought a fundamental change in the nature of the Soviet leadership system. The private office needed to be connected to the apparatus of the central party machinery – that of the Politburo, Orgburo, Secretariat and departments of the Central Committee and, of course, to other institutions – the GPU/NKVD, the Procuracy, the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the military. Elements of the system of collective leadership, operating via the formal meetings of the Politburo, survived at a greatly diminished level until 1937. Decrees and pronouncements were still issued in the Politburo's name, and this continued right through the Stalin era, but the reality of how power was exercised was very different.

During Stalin's prolonged summer vacations in 1931–36, Kaganovich, as the number two Secretary, remained in charge of the Politburo. The Stalin–Kaganovich correspondence demonstrates that, throughout these absences, Stalin was kept informed in detail on all major developments: via letters, special couriers, telegrams, and from 1935 onwards, by telephone. Stalin received a constant stream of communications, including NKVD reports, as well as receiving visitors. His deputies in Moscow were extremely solicitous of his opinion on matters great and small, and quickly fell in line with his opinions. In the great majority of matters referred to him by his deputies, Stalin simply confirmed proposals, or left things up to his deputies to decide.

In these years, Molotov and Kaganovich occupied a position of enormous influence and trust. Stalin felt free to confide in them his scathing judgement of other senior political figures (Ordzhonikidze, Litvinov, Kosior, Chubar' and others). They acted as gatekeepers, ensuring that the *vozhd'* was not overwhelmed with petty issues, and they acted as a filter for advice, opinion and information. They were in a position to influence his thinking, and to push particular policy lines. But Stalin was very far from being fenced-in by this; he had access to other sources of information and advice. Both Molotov and Kaganovich acted as Stalin's agents, constantly sought his opinion on policy matters craved his approval, and were very quick to fall in line with his thoughts.

Even away from Moscow, Stalin intervened to shape policy and even drafted legislation on his own account. He could operate through Kaganovich or Molotov, or through other members of the Politburo, and was quick to slap them down if they stepped out of line. This delegation of powers was fully compatible with dictatorial power. First, Stalin possessed far greater authority than Molotov or Kaganovich; he was the sole survivor of Lenin's Politburo; he was the architect of the 'revolution from above', and he was the party's chief of ideology. Second, he had made the careers of Molotov and Kaganovich and most other Politburo members. Third, on a personal level, he was more ruthless than they, and his colleagues deferred to him and held him in awe. This was in no way a relationship of equals.

The connections between the meetings in Stalin's Kremlin office and the formal meetings of the Politburo remain to be disentangled. The boundaries between the one and other was vague. The individuals who attended these private meetings most frequently were the leading members of the Politburo (Molotov, Kaganovich, Malenkov, Voroshilov, Mikoyan, Zhdanov and Ordzhonikidze). The practice of *oprosom* secured the consent of Politburo members for particular initiatives without any real discussion. Much of the Politburo's work was handled by *ad hoc* and permanent commissions that were charged with carrying out inquiries, resolving problem issues and drafting specific pieces of legislation.

Decisions taken at the meetings in Stalin's office were no less important than those taken at formally constituted Politburo meetings. The data on those attending the meetings in Stalin's office, the protocols and agendas of the Politburo, the correspondence between Stalin and Molotov/Kaganovich leave little doubt as to Stalin's pervasive influence on decision-making. We still lack a full picture of his activity, however. We do not yet have a record of his correspondence with other senior figures. Account must also be taken of informal contacts, and communications that were never recorded on paper.

Stalin and his subordinates

Stalin played a decisive role in party management and policy-making from the time of Lenin's death onwards. The defeat of the Left and Right Oppositions consolidated his control over the Politburo, but from 1928 to 1932 the Politburo remained a force, although Stalin was certainly more than *primus inter pares* within the ruling oligarchy. Stalin's willingness to involve himself in the details of policy-making was well known. Policy declarations by Stalin himself were seen as having as much, if not more, authority than a decision by the Politburo collectively. Stalin's famous letter to the editors of *Proletarskaya revolyutsiya* in 1931, on the writing of party history, set the agenda with regard to censorship in all fields.⁴³ This was a central aspect of Stalin's *modus operandi*.

Stalin's correspondence with Molotov and Kaganovich reveals a leadership that was immersed in work, attentive to the detail of decision-making, and was having to respond constantly to demands, petitions from regions, commissariats, enterprises and individuals. Much of the work was of a routine administrative nature. While the leadership was responding constantly to unfolding events, unanticipated problems and crises, there is also a very clear sense of a leadership that was in charge. What the correspondence reveals also is that, on technical matters, they were able to discuss issues with considerable detachment; on questions touching security, the ideology of the party, and the question of internal and external enemies, the approach revealed a reversion to a fixed mind set.

Beyond this ruling triumvirate, other members of the Stalin leadership exercised great power in their own realms, in charge of powerful departments of state or controlling major city and republican party organisations. These deputies were often drawn into conflicts with one another, reflecting both clashes of departmental interests and clashes of personality. In 1931, Stalin confided to Kaganovich his concern regarding the deep personal animus between Ordzhonikidze, Molotov and Kuibyshev. In Kuibyshev's case, concerning his alcoholism, questioning his ability to perform his duties. But Stalin's main fear was that such disputes, if left unchecked, could split the ruling group:

The note of c. Kuibyshev and his conduct in general creates a bad impression. It seems that he flees from work. On the other side still worse is the conduct of c. Ordzhonikidze. The latter evidently does not take into account that his conduct (with sharpness against cs. Molotov and Kuibyshev) leads objectively to the undermining of our

leading group, which was formed historically in the struggle with all forms of opportunism – creates a danger of its destruction. Surely he does not think that on this course he can find any support from our side?⁴⁴

Stalin counted on Kaganovich to exercise some restraint on his close friend Ordzhonikidze.

In 1931–32, Stalin sought to preserve the Politburo's formal status as the supreme decision-making body. In September 1931, he voiced alarm that Ordzhonikidze, head of Vesenkha, in attempting to raise targets for the importation of steel, was appealing repeatedly over the head of Sovnarkom to the Politburo, and seeking also to revise earlier Politburo decisions. On 9 September 1931, Stalin warned Kaganovich that such behaviour 'turns the PB into an organ for rubber stamping the resolutions of Vesenkha, NKS nab, NKZem etc. It is impossible to tolerate these attempts to turn the CC from a leading organ into an organ subordinate to the particular needs of individual commissariats'.⁴⁵

Stalin was also anxious to ensure that people of proper calibre were retained in the central party organs, to ensure that their authority was not diminished. In October 1931 he objected to the suggestion that Postyshev be transferred from the Secretariat to Sovnarkom, since he was more necessary and more valuable in the Secretariat.⁴⁶ In the summer of 1932, Stalin dropped his proposal to reappoint Kaganovich as General Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party in place of Kosior because he feared that this would weaken seriously the party Secretariat.⁴⁷ At this time Stalin appears to have been anxious to preserve the proper functioning of the Politburo, Orgburo and Secretariat. In the course of 1932 his attitude appears to have shifted decisively.

Stalin had the main say in all key appointments. Kaganovich recounts in his memoirs that on his appointment as General Secretary of Ukraine in 1925, and as first secretary of Moscow in 1930, both on Stalin's personal authorisation, he had extensive discussions with Stalin where he outlined what the main priorities should be.

Stalin used his Politburo colleagues as his agents. Molotov and Kaganovich were sent to Ukraine in 1932 to enforce the grain procurement policy. Kaganovich and other senior figures were regularly used as troubleshooters, dispatched to different republics and regions to enforce the centre's policy, and reported directly to Stalin on the situation they encountered and the action taken.

On fundamental questions of policy, the ruling group showed remarkable unity. The Politburo shifted between hard line and moderate

positions as circumstances changed. Nevertheless there were in the Politburo clashes of institutional interests and clashes of personality. Sovnarkom and Gosplan were charged with controlling the high-spending economic commissariats. Consequently in the early 1930s relations between Ordzhonikidze (head of NKTyazhProm), Molotov (Sovnarkom) and Kuibyshev (Gosplan) were often accrimonious.

The relations between Molotov and Kaganovich, both rivals to succeed Stalin inevitably were often strained. Kaganovich, as head of NKPS, clashed with Molotov over investment in the railways. Molotov also took exception to the practice of Ordzhonikidze and Kaganovich of protesting decisions of Sovnarkom to the Politburo. Relations between Ordzhonikidze and Kaganovich were close, and both for a period headed the two most powerful economic commissariats, jealously defending them from outside encroachment. Relations between Ordzhonikidze, Kaganovich, Kirov and Voroshilov were good. Molotov's relations with Litvinov, head of NKInDel, were strained, with both involved in a protracted battle over foreign policy from 1933 to 1939. Relations between Ordzhonikidze and L. P. Beria appear to have been particularly bad, and this appears to have been a factor in Ordzhonikidze's 'suicide' in 1937.

Stalin's relations with his subordinates tended towards the formal. Kaganovich could never address him with the informal *ty* (thou), preferring to use the respectful *vy* (you). There were times when Stalin enjoyed particularly cordial relations with certain subordinates: Molotov, Ordzhonikidze, Kaganovich, Kirov, Ezhov and Zhdanov. Molotov was the one figure who until 1949 enjoyed a constant presence, and was effectively Stalin's right-hand man. Some prominent early figures within the Stalin ruling group departed prematurely – Kirov was assassinated in 1934, Kuibyshev died of a heart attack in 1935, and Ordzhonikidze by his own hand in 1937.

The extent to which a dictatorship operated in these years depends in part on the extent to which Stalin's will could be thwarted. The assertion that the Politburo in 1932 refused Stalin's demand for Ryutin's execution has found no confirmation in the archives. It is questionable whether politically Stalin could at that time have presented such a demand to his colleagues. There remains the unresolved matter of whether a large number of delegates at the XVII party congress deleted Stalin's name from the list of candidates for election to the Central Committee, and whether there were moves behind the scene to curb his power. Whether Stalin was responsible for the assassination of Kirov, as a potential rival, remains open. On balance, the weight of evidence

favours the view that he took advantage of the assassination, rather than that he had a direct role in initiating it.⁴⁸

Stalin was careful not to allow any of his subordinates to become too powerful or too indispensable. The sideways transfer of Kaganovich to head the railways commissariat, NKPS, in January 1935 was undoubtedly motivated partly by such considerations. Kaganovich lost control of KPK (taken over by Ezhov), the Moscow city and oblast party (taken over by Khrushchev) and the Secretariat (assumed by Andreev). From 1930 to 1934 Kaganovich had built up an enormously powerful position, and in the Moscow party organisation a strong cult developed around him. NKPS was an organisation in which other leaders – Rudzutak, M. L. Rukhimovich and Andreev – had come unstuck. At the time there was speculation that Stalin might not have viewed such a failure for Kaganovich without a certain equanimity. In the event, Kaganovich succeeded in turning the railways around.

Stalin's power, although dictatorial, was not absolute, nor was it exercised without regard to the power of other subordinates. The retention of Rykov as chairman of Sovnarkom until December 1930, when other members of the Right opposition had already been disgraced, suggests that Stalin's freedom of action may have been limited. He retained Kosior and Chubar' as leaders in Ukraine in 1933 because of the lack of alternatives. But there may also have been political difficulties: the support they enjoyed among the raikom and obkom officials in Ukraine, and also possibly among the members of the all-union Politburo. Kaganovich had been withdrawn from Ukraine in 1928 because he had so antagonised other Ukrainian leaders, and his reappointment may have caused too many problems. Stalin put up with Rudzutak as head of TsKK–NKRRKI but had him removed in 1934. He kept Yagoda on as head of NKVD until September 1936, then criticised the secret police for being four years behind in their work of eliminating counter-revolution. His purge of the military high command in June 1937 removed senior military figures, such as Tukhachevsky, with whom he had clashed earlier; even dictatorial power had to be exercised with a measure of prudence.

Stalin exercised great control over the levers of repression. He interested himself closely in such matters. He had privileged access to materials on such questions, and his colleagues did not query his judgement on these issues. The existence of limits to Stalin's powers does not prove the absence of dictatorship, however. The power of the dictator is never constant and never fixed once and for all; there is always a tension between his power and that of his subordinates. In periods of

crisis, as with the famine of 1933, there may well be a tendency for the power of the subordinates to be enhanced. Stalin, in the period up to 1937, had to manage his subordinates, convince them or carry them by force of personality. In this period, Stalin's subordinates did not fear him, but they certainly held him in awe and sought to avoid incurring his disapproval.

Stalin's personal power

In the period 1928 to 1934, Stalin in a sense stood apart from his younger, less experienced Politburo colleagues. This is reflected in the closer bonds of friendship among his subordinates, notwithstanding also bitter rivalries. Stalin socialised with his colleagues, but the latter may well have felt more at ease with one another than with 'the boss'.⁴⁹

In the past, historians such as Boris Nicolaevsky, Leonard Schapiro and Robert Conquest have argued that Stalin, between 1930 and 1936, occupied the position of arbiter between the hard-liners and moderates in the Politburo.⁵⁰ But attempts to identify these factions have proved elusive. What can be confidently asserted, however, is that, within the Politburo in 1928–34, Stalin was the most consistent and vociferous advocate of repression and the use of the death penalty. He did not bow to pressure from his colleagues on these questions; rather, his colleagues took their cue from him.

Stalin played the leading role initiating the great show trials of this period. These 'trials' were a travesty of justice, with the verdicts decided in advance by the Politburo. From 1926 onwards the Politburo had its own Commission on Political (Court) Cases.⁵¹ The Shakhty trial of 1928 launched the campaign against the bourgeois specialists, which continued until Stalin decided in 1931 to rein it in.⁵² Through the construction of these 'enemy syndromes' Stalin created a lever to influence policy matters, to shape the climate of opinion, to attack those opposed to his policy line, and to enforce discipline on his immediate subordinates. Voroshilov wrote to Tomsky in 1928 expressing dismay that the Shakhty affair was being blown up out of all proportion and turned into a political campaign.⁵³ Stalin used it consciously to force the split with the 'Rightists', to discredit Rykov, Bukharin and Tomsky, but also to pressurise Kalinin, whose loyalty was suspect.⁵⁴

This became one of Stalin's primary *modus operandi*. He promoted the trials of the former non-Bolshevik intellectuals – the Promparty trial,

the Menshevik Buro, and the case of the Labouring Peasants' Party. He was an enthusiastic advocate of the use of exemplary show trials. In August 1930, he instructed Molotov that action was to be taken against officials in the State Bank and the Commissariat of Finance, declaring that 'two or three dozen wreckers from the administration must be executed, including a dozen bookkeepers of various kinds', and that 'Kondratiev, Groman and another couple of scoundrels must certainly be executed'.⁵⁵ In September 1930, on Stalin's instructions, forty-eight 'food wreckers' were executed.⁵⁶

When we turn to other areas, a similar pattern is revealed. Stalin was the person who pushed for the sacking and demotion of Rukhimovich from NKPS in 1931 (against the advice of Molotov and Ordzhonikidze) and the transfer of G. I. Blagonravov, together with a large number of GPU officials, to the railways, which saw a huge increase in repression in this sector, including trials and executions.⁵⁷ In agriculture, in August 1932 Stalin himself drafted the draconian laws on the theft of collective farm property.

It was Stalin who was to the fore, pressing for punitive measures by the Ukrainian leadership to enforce grain procurement in 1932. But he was obliged to cut the targets for Ukrainian grain procurement. He failed in his plan to oust Kosior and Chubar' from the leadership of the Ukrainian party and government apparatus, but succeeded in having a new head of the Ukrainian GPU appointed (replacing S. F. Redens with V. A. Balitskii), and in parachuting Postyshev into the Ukrainian party leadership.

In 1933, Stalin berated Ordzhonikidze and Kaganovich for supporting a Politburo resolution which rebuked A. Ya. Vyshinskii, the State Procurator, for pursuing a policy of repression against officials responsible for the production of incomplete combine harvesters. He condemned Kaganovich roundly for this in a personal letter, and on Stalin's insistence the Politburo resolution was rescinded.⁵⁸ Following the assassination of Kirov it was Stalin who drafted the legislation for an intensification of repression against dissidents.

There is one other extremely significant aspect to Stalin's stance on repression. He was the Politburo member most inclined to see political cases (and indeed cases of economic disorder) as part of a wider international conspiracy involving foreign intelligence agencies, as is clear already with the Shakhty case in 1928. In 1932, he was anxious to link resistance in Ukraine to grain procurement to the influence of 'kulaks', 'nationalists', and foreign intelligence agencies. We see the same tendency in Stalin's response to the Nakhaev affair in 1934

(see Chapter 4, pp. 127–8).⁵⁹ A similar pattern is revealed in the response to the Kirov assassination.

Stalin respected officials with a background in the secret police, and promoted them into key positions. He appointed Beria as head of the Transcaucasian Federation, and made E. G. Evdokimov first secretary of the North Caucasus kraikom. Collectivisation and ‘dekulakisation’ gave the GPU a major role in the countryside. The development of the Gulag and its major construction projects served to accord the Chekists a position of enormous authority within the Stalinist state. Already by 1931, following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the Soviet Far East was under Red Army and GPU administration.

Nicolaevsky writes of a mood in the party for reconciliation, and for a move away from confrontation in 1933, after the famine. At the XVII party congress in 1934, Bukharin and Kamenev called for unity, and Kamenev offered a defence of Stalin’s personal dictatorship.⁶⁰ This is significant with regard to the partial relaxation in 1935–36. We see this trend in industry under Ordzhonikidze, and in rail transport (notwithstanding the attack on the ‘bourgeois’ specialists, the so-called ‘limiters’) under Kaganovich. Controls over agriculture were eased, with the abolition of the *politotdely* in the Machine-Tractor Stations and kolkhozy, the easing of legislation against ‘kulaks’ and against those charged with theft of state property, and concessions on the private plots. Stalin seems to have gone with this current.

The shift towards relaxation in 1935–36 requires further study. It was related undoubtedly to a general improvement in the economic climate. But it appears also to be connected to a certain shift in the balance of power between individuals and institutions. Part of this was an informal alliance between Ordzhonikidze (NKTyazhProm) and Kaganovich (NKPS) to protect their officials and workers from persecution by the Procuracy and OGPU. Their co-operation in 1933 to try and block Vyshinskii’s moves towards increased repression in industry was the first sign of such a common front. Ordzhonikidze and Kaganovich were close personal friends. They were also united in a common struggle against Molotov (Sovnarkom) and Gosplan, who sought to hold back investment in these two sectors.⁶¹

By the summer of 1936, with the compilation of evidence against an alleged ‘Trotskyist’ conspiracy against the Soviet leadership, and against the background of the Spanish civil war and a deteriorating international situation, the pretext for a renewed offensive against anti-Soviet elements was found. The two institutions that were placed in the firing line were NKTyazhProm and NKPS.

Stalin's secret chancellery

Niels Erik Rosenfeldt, in *Knowledge and Power*, asserts that the key to understanding the basis of the Stalin dictatorship is his secret chancellery. He argues that Stalin's secret apparatus of rule consisted of various structures: the Central Committee's Secret Department (*sekretnyi otdel TsK*), the Bureau of the Central Committee's Secretariat (*Byuro Sekretariata TsK*) and the Central Committee's Special Sector (*Osobyi sektor TsK*). This apparatus was headed from 1922 to 1930 by Stalin's assistants, A. M. Nazaretyan, I. P. Tovstukha and L. Z. Mekhlis. From 1930 until a few months before Stalin's death it was headed by A. N. Poskrebyshev.⁶²

Rosenfeldt's argument is based on the assumption that all highly personalised systems of rule require some apparatus through which that leader is able to operate. Such bodies provide the leader with a distinct advantage over other leaders, providing him or her with alternative sources of information, alternative sources of policy advice, thus allowing him/her to by-pass other, more formal, structures in the ministries, and to impose his/her will upon these bodies. Rosenfeldt's argument has considerable force, but the search for a secret chancellery may be misconceived. The secret department that he identifies as the key to Stalin's power was in effect a department concerned with technical operations: the handling of communications and the dispatch of instructions and decrees, the organisation of codes and ciphers, the servicing of the leading party bodies with materials, the organisation of the library and so on.

The key to Stalin's power rather lies in the combination of formal and informal decision-making procedures. The meetings in his Kremlin office were connected directly to the main structures of power, primarily, it seems, through personal contact. Kaganovich was responsible for the Orgburo/Secretariat until 1935. Molotov was in charge of Sovnarkom/STO. Both dealt with the whole range of policy issues. Other leaders had a more restrictive role, and tended to answer for the work of their departments. Stalin was constrained only partly by the power of entrenched interests, although he tended to interpret bureaucratic obstruction to the implementation of official policy as being maliciously motivated.

Stalin, unlike his subordinates, was not weighed down with departmental responsibilities, and could take a broad view of policy matters. His authority within the ruling group was such that his views after 1932 were almost never challenged openly. Such cases were exceptional. Litvinov, it is said, was one of the senior figures who did engage

in such confrontations. The fiery Ordzhonikidze was little constrained by the subtleties of rank in expressing his views. But Molotov, Kaganovich and others assiduously sought Stalin's opinion on matters great and small, they anticipated his thinking, and quickly adjusted their views to comply with his. Stalin could heed advice but he was often contemptuously dismissive of the opinions of even his closest colleagues.

The personalisation of decision-making in the 1930s was shaped partly by the need for speed in resolving urgent and highly sensitive policy matters. At the same time, control over information facilitated the strengthening of Stalin's dictatorship. In the mid-1920s, Politburo members and even some members of the Central Committee were provided with GPU reports about the internal situation in the country. This system seems to have been revised drastically by the early 1930s, so that by 1932 some sensitive GPU reports on the situation in the countryside appear to have been supplied only to Stalin, Molotov and Yakovlev (head of NKZem USSR). Stalin's Politburo colleagues were in no position to dispute his views regarding questions of sabotage, wrecking or conspiracy, because he alone was privy to the reports provided by the NKVD.⁶³

Control over information was vital in foreign policy and defence policy. D. H. Watson shows how on occasions officials reported directly to Stalin, by-passing NKInDel (see pp. 147–8), and military intelligence provided by the Red Army almost certainly reported directly to Stalin.

The Politburo's resolutions appear not have been drafted with the secret chancellery. Rather, it appears that they were drafted by the apparatus of the Orgburo, or by *ad hoc* commissions of the Politburo set up for the task. In other cases, the Politburo approved and amended resolutions that were submitted to it by other bodies, particularly from the commissariats.

Formal and informal structures of decision-making

From about 1930 onwards, the decision-making process in the USSR became increasingly fragmented, with policy-making in different fields being dominated by particular institutional interests and certain key political figures. This institutional fragmentation proceeded in step with the trend towards the personalisation of the policy-making process.

In economic policy, the co-ordinating role was played by Sovnarkom-STO, assisted by Gosplan, NKFin and Gosbank. Industrial policy was

dominated by Vesenkha and NKTyazhProm, and agricultural policy by NKZem and NKSovkhoz. On economic policy matters, Stalin's involvement and interest fluctuated considerably over time. In the period 1928–33 he was involved closely in the development and implementation of the First Five-Year Plan, with collectivisation and with the problems of the famine. From 1933 onwards, his involvement in the details of industrial policy declined, and here responsibility was left largely in the hands of Sovnarkom–STO–Gosplan. But the defence industries were a sector where Stalin remained very closely involved. On rail transport policy, he intervened intermittently; his influence in 1934–35 was crucial in changing the leadership of NKPS and effecting a major shift of investment into this sector.⁶⁴

In economic policy, Stalin concentrated on certain key indicators of performance: investment targets for the economy; output targets for industry; procurement targets for grain; and targets for foreign trade and expenditure of hard currency. He could on occasion show great realism in dealing with questions of economic management (notwithstanding the blunders that produced collectivisation and the famine), but (unlike some of his colleagues) he had no practical experience of running a economic commissariat, so his understanding of the functioning of the economic apparatus was consequently more simplistic, and he was more inclined to attribute problems not to structural failures but to malicious intent – the actions of enemies and wreckers.

Through the 1930s Stalin closely involved himself in agricultural policy. All major changes in agricultural policy, including revisions to procurement targets for individual oblasts, required Stalin's approval, and he changed targets as he thought fit (see Chapter 4). Agriculture was a particularly sensitive field, because of its highly charged political nature, and the problems of re-ordering the lives of the great majority of the population who lived under Soviet rule. But as well as these political and ideological considerations, there were also more practical considerations. Adjustments in the targets for one branch of industry carried repercussions for industry as a whole, and had to be done with care. Agriculture, by contrast, was a buffer, a reserve of raw materials. Here, adjustments to procurement targets depended crudely on the degree of pressure that was applied to the peasantry.

In organisational and personnel matters, the main co-ordinating role was performed by the party Secretariat, the Orgburo and ORPO. A key supervisory role was performed by the organs of party and state control. Stalin left most of the routine matters to his deputies. Already by 1928 the responsibility for managing the work of the Secretariat and Orgburo

had been delegated to Molotov, and later to Kaganovich. But Stalin showed a very close interest in key appointments.

In defence policy, the leading role was played by NKVMDel (later NKOboron), the Military High Command and the complex of operational bodies attached to it. The Politburo's Defence Commission played the chief directing and co-ordinating role. Stalin involved himself closely in this field. He clashed sharply with Tukhachevsky in 1930 over the latter's ambitious plans for mechanising the armed forces, but patched up relations with him in 1932, offering him an unprecedented apology for past differences. He followed developments in armaments production closely, including biological and chemical weapons.⁶⁵ Even a critical field such as defence policy decision-making could be very informal. Innokenty Khalepskii, head of the Red Army's mechanisation and motorisation unit, recounts a late-night meeting in November 1932 at Ordzhonikidze's Kremlin apartment, with Stalin, I. P. Pavlunovskii (in charge of defence industries in NKTyazhProm) and A. D. Pudalov (director of the Stalingrad tractor works) where the adaptation of the Stalingrad works to tank production was discussed.⁶⁶

In internal security, the leading role played by NKVD Stalin showed a very close interest in internal security matters, from the Shakhty trial right through to the Great Terror of 1936–38. Matters of internal security were supposedly his forte, and here his opinions were not to be questioned. The decision to expand the system of forced labour, the Gulag, after 1929 was taken quickly in response to the crisis of handling tens of thousands of dispossessed 'kulaks'. N. M. Yanson, narkom NKYust RSFSR, played an important role in promoting the initiative, although figures such as Yu. L. Pyatakov, already when vice-chairman of Vesenkha in November 1925, had spoken of the advantages of such measures. The scheme received Stalin's full backing.⁶⁷

In foreign policy, NKInDel played the leading role, with input from Comintern, the foreign trade commissariats, and military intelligence and counter-intelligence. Stalin took a very close interest, not only over the general question of strategy, but also over the details of policy, approving text of speeches and communiqués.

Stalin also played a leading role in other fields of policy-making. In questions of social policy he was active, playing the decisive role in the decision to abolish food rationing in 1935. In the field of cultural policy, his influence was also immense, an example being the convening of the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, which adopted the principle of 'socialist realism'. The congress was supervised closely by Kaganovich on Stalin's behalf.

Stalin required subordinates in the party, state, economic and military bodies, and in the territorial administrative structures, who could be trusted to competently carry out his policies. In the main he was extremely successful in achieving this end. Where policy failed to correspond with his wishes, and where there were policy failures or breakdowns, there were mechanisms of investigation and means of calling officials to account. Notwithstanding the complex stratagems of concealment, family circles and mutual protection, the rule of the centre prevailed and, where it willed it, relentlessly so. Officials might be allowed latitude but they operated in a climate where the possibility of a day of reckoning might come.

Conclusion

Constitutionally, the Soviet regime was based on a theoretical separation of the structures and functions of party and state. In the early 1930s, this system underwent a significant change, as the institutions within the central party bodies which had provided the underpinning of a system of collective leadership were undermined. Between 1929 and 1933, the basis of a system of personal dictatorship was established. But, alongside the dictatorship, some elements of the old system of oligarchic rule survived, in which other satellite leaders continued to wield considerable power within their own domains and with the councils of the leader. This is one key reason why Stalin's subordinates failed to check the drift towards dictatorial rule. The leadership was held together by a broad consensus as to the policies to be pursued, and within this system Stalin delegated considerable power to his deputies. But Stalin's authority was unquestioned. The real centre of decision-making shifted from the Politburo to Stalin's Kremlin office, and decision-making became highly personalised. After 1933 there was no mechanism by which the General Secretary could be called to account.

Decision-making in the Soviet system of the 1930s involved a complex number of institutions, with a built-in tension between the party and governmental bodies, and between control agencies and operative institutions. The power of different commissariats, and different republican and regional authorities, shifted significantly over time. In decision-making, the relations between Stalin and the heads of operative agencies were often tense (the rift between Stalin and Tukhachevsky in 1930; the rift between Stalin and Chubar' and Kosior in 1933). Stalin could also shift from being offensively abrasive to being

emollient. Policy implementation often produced results that were unforeseen, and the centre was obliged to take into account major limits to what it could enforce or attain. Notwithstanding these qualifications, the system of political leadership was highly centralised and one in which Stalin's personal influence was immense.

Stalin's involvement in decision-making was constant and wide-ranging, but he did not (and could not) decide everything. He delegated decision-making powers to subordinates, expecting those subordinates to show initiative and to act within their own powers, but to be attentive to the signals regarding the leader's policy priorities. In this period, Stalin concentrated on issues of prime importance: internal security, defence, foreign policy, economic policy, organisational matters and personnel appointments. The party-state apparatus was intended to handle most of the routine matters of government, while Stalin's Kremlin office handled the most sensitive political issues. Through its links with the other structures of power in the party and state he was in a position to ensure that he retained control over the main issues of policy, and had the means to intervene as and when he chose.

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18. Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym*, p. 468.
19. *Politbyuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povestki dnya zasedanii: Tom II 1930–1939, Katalog* (Moscow, 2001). In 1932, we have 30 days on which decisions of the Politburo (reshenie Politbyuro) were issued, but on 27 days just one or two decisions were taken. The highest number issued on one day was 18. The most intense months were June, July and August, which coincided with the holiday period of Politburo members, but also coincided with mounting crisis in agriculture. In 1933, there were ten days on which Politburo resolutions were issued, and in 1934, twenty-four days, with most in June, July, September and October.
20. *Politbyuro TsK RKP(b)–VKP(b) Povestki dnya zasedanii: Tom I 1919–1929, Katalog* (Moscow, 2000).
21. *KPSS v resolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh* (Moscow, 1975) t. 2, pp. 104–5.
22. *Ibid.*, t. 3, p. 95.
23. E. A. Rees, 'Stalin, the Politburo and Rail Transport Policy', in Julian Cooper, Maureen Perrie, E. A. Rees (eds), *Soviet History 1917–1953: Essays in Honour of R. W. Davies*, pp. 107–9.
24. RGASPI, 17/3/961, 62.
25. RGASPI, 17/3/761, 12; RGASPI, 17/3/898, 8; RGASPI, 17/163/853, 3; 103–12. A similar formulation is found in other protocols of the period – RGASPI, 17/163/854, 855; RGASPI, 17/113/818, 10; 17/3/946, 20–1.
26. RGASPI, 17/3/823, 9. See also the Politburo's orders to the Secretariat to resolve matters concerning local party organs and their reports – RGASPI, 17/3/860, 5.
27. RGASPI, 17/113/818, 10.
28. RGASPI, 127/3/941, 55/35.
29. RGASPI, 17/3/946, 90/78.
30. For Soviet government institutions, see D. H. Watson, *Molotov and Soviet Government: Sovnarkom 1930–1941* (Basingstoke, 1996).
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 50.
32. GARF 5446/1/58–64.
33. RGAE, 8543/1/30, 85–6. No areas were allocated to Rudzutak, who was apparently on leave.
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36. RGASPI, 17/3/939, 69/49.
37. See E. Huskey, 'Vyshinskii, Krylenko and the Shaping of the Soviet Legal Order', *Slavic Review*, vol. 46, 1987, pp. 414–28.
38. O. Khlevnyuk et al., *Stalinskoe Politbyuro v 30-e gody*, pp. 82–7.
39. J. F. Hough and M. Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 412–17.
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41. R. W. Davies, 'The Syrtsov–Lominadze Affair', *Soviet Studies*, 1981, vol. xxxiii; pp. 29–50.
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