

Boxing and Power Struggle: Bukharin Versus Stalin

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We began with Stalin's: "One death is a tragedy; one million is a statistic." That Stalin indeed killed millions, most of them very ordinary people, may help explain why Russians remain split on whether Stalin was a hero or a monster. The "statistic" that he killed millions is somehow weighed against other statistics of growth, modernization, or victory in war. We cannot examine the tragedy of each of Stalin's victims; we can only tell the stories of a few, but each such story moves us from the statistic back to the tragedy.²

I have told the tragedy of one death – that of one of Stalin's best known victims – Nikolai Bukharin. I have described ripple effects on his family, his friends and colleagues. Stories, such as these, may offer more insight than more general narratives. This is particularly true of the compelling story of Nikolai Bukharin and Anna Larina. It contains all the elements of high drama: love and devotion interspersed with intrigue, betrayal, hope, weakness, friendship, naïveté, endurance, optimism, bitterness, and ultimate tragedy. If this were just the story of an ordinary couple trying to escape Stalin's grasp, it would be worth telling. But Anna and Nikolai's personal story intersects the course of the history of the first half of the twentieth century. As Nikolai wrote Anna in his farewell letter: "Personal fates are transitory and wretched" in contrast to the "achievement of socialism". This book explains how the experiment with the world's first socialist state went terribly wrong and that it may have been preordained to veer off course.

The ultimate irony of their story is that Anna Larina's battle for Nikolai's reinstatement by a future generation of party leaders had to wait

¹ This paper is a draft of the concluding chapter of a book on the Soviet power struggle as seen from the vantage point of Nikolai Bukharin and his wife, Anna Larina. The book is based on archival research. Its most important scholarly contribution is the analysis of Politburo transcripts, now published in three volumes by Paul R. Gregory, Oleg Khlevniuk, and Aleksandr Vatlin, Stenogrammy zasedanii Politbiuro TsK VKP(b), 1923-1938 (Moscow: Rosspen, 2007), and of the "uncorrected" transcripts of Central Committee plenums from the late 1920s to February-March 1937. This chapter attempts to provide a framework for assessing the power struggle and the inevitability of Stalin's victory. I thank the Hoover Institution for support and the staff of the Hoover Archive for their help and advice.

² Two books that focus primarily on the experiences of ordinary people in the course of Stalin's purges are: Hiroaki Kuromiya, Voices of the Dead: Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Orlando Figes, The Whisperers: Private Lives in Stalin's Russia (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

until the party was on its last legs. Both Nikolai and Anna had a firm belief in the eventual victory of socialism, that the Stalin years were a transitory time of troubles, and that a new generation of enlightened party leaders would take over. The party leaders whom Gorbachev ordered to reinstate Bukharin were dull bureaucrats who uninterested in justice and resentful of being given such a distasteful task. What could have been an ending on a high note turns into another disappointment. Within three years, the Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin walls. The communist party was disbanded as such, and the membership card of the reinstated Nikolai Bukharin disappeared into some vault of records of a defunct organization. Even worse, public opinion in post-Soviet Russia continue to rate Joseph Stalin among the top figures of Russian history. Nowhere in such polls is the name Nikolai Bukharin mentioned, either positively or negatively. In death, Stalin again has outwitted Bukharin.

We study history in retrospect. We already know how things turned out. Stalin won. Bukharin lost, along with many others. Bukharin was executed after a court trial. Trotsky was felled by a Stalin assassin. Many other Bolshevik founders were dispatched into the execution fields without ceremony. The USSR was molded by Stalin's vision, not Bukharin's. Looking back, different writers can come to different conclusions: Some might be convinced that Stalin's victory was bound to happen. Others, looking at the same evidence, marvel at how unlikely Stalin's triumph was. If we could somehow transport ourselves back to January 27, 1924, as somber party leaders carried Lenin's coffin to its final resting place, I probably would have been among those who thought a Stalin succession unlikely. However, after I have observed Stalin's management of the power struggle, I conclude that his success was the most likely outcome.

A boxing match provides a good analogy for the power struggle that began with Lenin's death and ended with Stalin's gaining control of the Politburo in late 1929. There are many determinants of who wins a boxing match: Each boxer brings to the match his characteristics (weight, training, eye-hand coordination, right-handed or left-handed, etc.). The match takes place within a given set of rules (no punching below the belt or when the opponent has been knocked down), and there must be a referee to interpret and enforce the rules. Each boxer decides the strategy he intends to employ (leading with left jabs, many clinches, etc.). There is a designated prize (a trophy or prize money); the boxers may differ in motivation to win this prize. One may have a stronger will to win than the other. Finally, there are random factors: What is the temperature? Did one boxer sleep poorly? To complicate matters further, these factors are interrelated: The strategy chosen is not independent of physical characteristics. The boxer cannot choose to dominate with left jabs if he

is right-handed. If the temperature is high, perhaps the strategy must be adjusted. Given the number of determinants and their interactions, even the greatest of experts cannot know the outcome. At best, odds makers can give us probabilities of who will win and who will lose. The same would have been true on that bleak and bitterly cold day of January 24, 1924. The boxing match analogy explains why the outcome of any power struggle cannot be predicted with certainty, but it also gives us a framework for analyzing the Soviet succession struggle in which Nikolai Bukharin played such an integral role.

Let's start with personal characteristics:

Characteristics: Nikolai Bukharin was gregarious, full of joy, intellectually curious, sensitive, and fascinated by the world around him. He loved to write on philosophy, politics, literature, poetry, and the arts. He painted wildlife and plants, he loved animals, climbed mountains, and was an accomplished caricaturist. He tended to think the best of others. He was widely liked within the party. Lenin characterized him as the "Golden Boy" of the party. Despite three marriages, his family life was happy. He maintained an extended family in his Kremlin apartment that included his father, his second wife incapacitated by illness, his daughter, his young and devoted wife, Anna Larina, and, near the end, their infant son. He came from the middle class. His father was a math teacher. Bukharin bore defeat poorly. He frequently became ill when he suffered setbacks, which gave him reason to retreat from political fights. Many in the party did not take him seriously; he was too "soft" and emotional – a crybaby. He was incapable of political infighting and intrigue. He changed his mind. He talked and wrote too much and was characterized as a windbag. He probably evaluated his intellectual work too highly. In his farewell letter to Anna, he devoted as much time to instructions on preserving his prison writings as on personal matters.

Stalin was born to a poor family. He was ashamed of his mother. His father abandoned him. He grew up in street gangs in Georgia where violence, revenge and retribution were facts of daily life. He received a seminary education but he spent his days as a young man in radical and revolutionary pursuits that required the use of terror, murder, and violence. Stalin worked hard to compensate for his deficient formal education. He read prodigiously and maintained a massive personal library, whose books he actually read and annotated. In his youth, Stalin writes poetry in his native Georgian. Lenin recognized Stalin's cruel and sadistic side, which he put to advantage at the civil war front. Whereas Lenin was an armchair terrorist, Stalin was a natural terrorist who relished the killing of enemies and revenge. Stalin's family life was dysfunctional. He neglected his mother. He quarreled with his sons,

neither of whom amounted to anything. His first wife died after the birth of their first son. He abused his second wife, who committed suicide. He had no real friends. Those with whom he associated were largely from his Georgian days, but he betrayed friend and foe alike without hesitation. He regarded his fellow party leaders a potential rivals. They either joined him without question or they had to be removed. He was strongly motivated by jealousy. He never forgot insults or slights. He was a man of great patience, willing to wait to exact revenge for years or decades.

Bukharin was far from a saint, but was angelic when placed next to Stalin. He was content to use Stalin's dominant position in the party to defeat his ideological enemies, but he protested indignantly when Stalin turned the same weapon him. As he saw himself losing to Stalin he began to grovel and engage in effusive flattery, a ploy that hurt more than it helped. He deserted colleagues and friends to prove to Stalin that he was doing no wrong. He was easily outwitted by Stalin, who thought things through before hand while Bukharin acted on the spot based on his emotions.

Rules and Referees: The Soviet Union itself was in the process of creation as the power struggle began. Laws and constitutions remained to be written. Territorial boundaries remained to be defined. State organizations had to be created. Behind this fog of flux, certain guiding principles were clear: The Soviet Union was not to be a democracy; instead, it was to be run by the Bolshevik party – the dictatorship of the proletariat. Although it was still somewhat unclear at what level the party would exercise its power, it was already unlikely that it would be based on grassroots party democracy. From the earliest days of Bolshevik rule, power was to be vested in elite bodies – first in a small Central Committee, then in the Political Bureau (Politburo) of the Central Committee as the size of the latter expanded.

The Bolshevik Party, however, did have a set of rules of conduct, dating back to its underground days, that governed relations among its members, especially those at the top. Three rules were to have an important effect on the power struggle: First, personal conflicts were to be brought to the attention of higher party bodies, which were to intermeditate among the conflicting parties. It was the party's duty to bring together conflicting parties for a resolution. Second, party members could disagree among themselves on policy issues, but once a decision was made, they had to support that policy and they should not make their disagreement known to the party base. Third, decisions on party policy were to be made, preferably by consensus, but, if necessary, by majority vote. Rules 2 and 3 resulted in the frequent use of compromise commissions, which brought together disputing parties to try to draft resolutions that all parties could support.

In order for such rules to work, there must be a referee with power to enforce them. There must also be tradition and custom that the rules will be followed in good faith. Given that this was to be a dictatorship of the proletariat, there would be no role for an independent judiciary. The party would have to police itself. "Control commissions" were set up for this purpose, but who was to referee the referee, especially if the sinning party official occupied one of the highest of positions? Who was to be the ultimate rule enforcer? Such matters were unresolved as the power struggle began.

Stalin resolved the referee problem simply: Rules were for others, not for him, and he was the one who made the rules. Although he would take instructions from Lenin during his lifetime, Stalin insisted that the "Central Committee: (Stalin) was the official referee. Indeed, his role of general secretary did thrust him into the business of refereeing high level disputes among Politburo members. But Stalin also displayed a deep knowledge of party procedures, much of which he probably made up. In his conflicts with Trotsky, it was Stalin who ruled out their demand to present their platform to the party conference because submission dates had expired. Given that Stalin was the referee, he could decide when to set aside rules, especially for himself. When Bukharin demanded his right to party arbitration in conflicts with Stalin, the "Central Committee" ruled against him.

Strategy: Bukharin was, by his own admission, a poor organizer and hence a poor strategist. He was tempestuous. He often acted or spoke before thinking. In contrast, Stalin was a careful and patient strategist, who understood constraints, limits, and the importance of timing. Given these differences, it is not surprising that Stalin had worked out a plan for victory in the power struggle. Bukharin's plan was, at best, ad hoc and improvised.

Stalin's strategy aimed at three things: First, he had to always be on the winning side in the Politburo or Central Committee. He should not particularly care who his allies were or what their policies were. Allies could be changed when convenient. Second, he knew that he was not particularly likeable or admired; he had to gain allies either by persuading them that siding with him was in their own interest or by force and threat. The use of force required that he be able to bring force to bear and control information. Even before Lenin's death, Stalin gathered compromising information through shady associates, with which he bullied friends and opponents alike. It was not until the death of the independent head of the secret police (Dzerzhinsky) that he was able to have his own man in charge of the secret police. Third, Stalin took advantage of his official position as General Secretary of the Central Committee to control appointments and agendas. His key appointments were of regional party

secretaries, who came to make up the majority of the Central Committee. His control of agendas enabled him to determine when meetings would be held, what would be discussed, and for him to act as referee in cases of disputes.

Bukharin's strategy, at least in the early phases of the struggle, was almost nonexistent. As an ally of Stalin, he may have concluded that the power struggle was over and the decision had fallen in favor of collective rule. His zeal in dispatching Trotsky reflects a strategy of eliminating ideological opponents from power. He may have presumed that Stalin was really on his side and would be content sharing collective rule. After it became clear that Stalin was aiming for one man rule, Bukharin's strategy was to consolidate around him influential party members, who like him, lacked the power to intimidate others but held common policy views that resonated with the party base. Indeed, the evidence is that Bukharin, in addition to his disciples, had a large following who favored his policies and abhorred the radical measures that Stalin was using in the countryside.

Bukharin's biggest strategical error was to not appeal to this base at a time when he stood a chance; that is, when his allies included the prime minister, the head of the trade unions, and the head of the Moscow party. Bukharin opposed grassroots party rule out of political expediency when he needed to defeat Trotsky, but he rejected party democracy when he needed it most. Bukharin followed party rules in not reaching out to his numerous supporters when they could have been of most assistance to him. After Stalin methodically emasculated his allies, Bukharin's only remaining strategy was the power of his pen, which Stalin took away with his firing from Pravda in 1929.

Stalin also showed an ability to adjust his strategy to events. He understood that the safest way to deal with his enemies was to kill them, but he knew that if he tried to kill his enemies too early he could rally his opponents. By pursuing a gradualist policy, Stalin was able to ratchet up his goals from demotion of enemies, to expulsion from the party to execution. Stalin also knew how to capitalize on fortuitous events. Assuming he did not order the murder of Kirov (which is a big assumption), Stalin moved with lightning speed to take advantage of the opportunities the murder offered. Also Stalin knew to beat a temporary retreat from forced collectivization in March of 1930 before opposition could coalesce.

The Prize and the motivation to win: Stalin and Bukharin viewed the ultimate prize differently. For Stalin the prize was to equate himself with the "party." After vanquishing his foes, Stalin spoke of himself as "Stalin" or "The Central Committee." He needed absolute rule to secure rapid industrialization, a strong defense, and to remove enemies from the

countryside and city, as he saw fit. Stalin wanted socialism without a human face, in which state power was the ultimate objective even if it meant sacrificing efficiency and productivity. What counted was not what agriculture produced but the state's ability to commandeer its output and control its people. Incentives were not important; simply force workers and peasants to do the state's bidding.

Bukharin goal was what today would be called "socialism with a human face." Under Bukharin's socialism, there would be a monopoly party but that party would be less intrusive and threatening. In particular, peasants would be allowed to live their own lives, sell to whom they wanted, and join collective forms of agriculture if they proved to more advantageous. Bukharin's socialism would have valued economic incentives and sought arrangements that promoted efficiency. State ownership would have been favored in heavy industry, but most likely, even socialized industry would have been cautioned to operate with an eye to markets and even profit.

Bukharin's "socialism with a human face" would have been run by collective rule of like minded party leaders. Unlike Stalin, Bukharin at one point in a debate with political adversaries declared: "I know I am not the party." Bukharin would be one of many. As Bukharin declared on more than one occasion: "I do not seek power." For him, the prize would have been a stable functioning collective rule that made the types of policy decisions that he favored. His job would be to set the tone of ideology. The actual governing would be left to others who had better organizational skills.

Chance factors: Stalin's victory could have been thwarted by any number of chance factors. Lenin could have lived to a ripe old age. An assassin's bullet or bomb could have killed Stalin at any time as it almost did Bukharin in 1918. He could have been killed in a plane or automobile crash. His Politburo colleagues could have arrested him in 1941 for his miscalculation that Hitler would not attack. The able and bloodthirsty Beria had the wherewithal to kill Stalin but did not. Trotsky could have been a better politician and less of an egoist. When Stalin was allied with Kamenev and Zinoviev in 1925 and 1926, they could have decided not to protect him from Lenin's Political testament (when they later asked why he was not grateful to them, Stalin replied: "Gratitude is a malady for dogs"). His Great Break of forced collectivization and dekulakization could have escalated into uncontrollable violence, which would have prompted even his allies to relieve him. Stalin clearly worried about a military dictatorship. He kept military leaders out of the Politburo, and he executed Russia's top generals for fear they were becoming too popular. Once stripped of his military authority, Trotsky proved powerless, except as an irritant. His successor, Mikhail Frunze, had impeccable social and

military credentials and was a rising star in the Politburo. If Stalin had not murdered him (according to much evidence) in October of 1925, Frunze could have been a formidable opponent, who had force to back him up.

All of these things did not happen, but they could have. If they had, Stalin's best laid plans would have fallen into the ash heap of history.

There are different views of Bukharin's chances for success in the 1920s. The historical literature is divided on whether Bukharin was a potential victor over Stalin. Stephen Cohen, in his influential biography, argues that Bukharin, as the "favorite of the party", indeed stood a good chance to succeed Lenin.³ Bukharin's fatal error was that he played by the rules and did not go public with his disagreements with Stalin until it was too late. Miklos Kun, in his biography of Bukharin, also argues that Bukharin had a real chance to create a united front against Stalin. Bukharin had potent allies who controlled the machinery of state, the trade unions, and the Moscow party organization. Even though Bukharin may not have been a good organizer or administrator, he nevertheless could have served as a rallying point for those with managerial skills and he had a large number of loyal supporters in the party base.⁴ At the opposite end of the spectrum, E. H. Carr argues that Bukharin was a relatively insignificant figure. He never occupied a party position of real authority. He never really stood a chance against the better organized Stalin. He did not have firm views or opinions. It is only Bukharin's appeal and his tragic fate that have kept him in the public eye.⁵

What is clear is that Bukharin's importance is that he offered an alternative that was quite different from Stalin's. We do not know whether Bukharin's vision would have succeeded. It was never tried. Lenin's rule was too brief, and he pursued contradictory policies. We do not know what would have happened if Lenin had lived a long and healthy life. Insofar as Stalin borrowed his policies from Trotsky, a Trotsky victory would likely have led to a result similar to Stalin's. With his aloof approach, Trotsky would have been less personally engaged than Stalin.

F. A. Hayek, in his 1944 Road to Serfdom, argues that the victory of a Stalin-like figure was inevitable. There is no surprise that Stalin won, and his victory is less significant than we would like to think. Hayek

³ Stephen F. Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution (New York: Vintage, 1973).

⁴ M. Kun, Bukharin: ego druz'ia i vrugi (Moscow: Respublika, 1992), 233-4.

⁵ E. H. Carr, "The Legend of Bukharin," The Times Literary Supplement, September 20, 1974.

argued that that the most brutal and cruel leader from the pool of potential leaders would inevitably win power struggles in what he termed “administered economies.”⁶ In fact, Stalin’s conduct of the power struggle closely follows Hayekian logic, Bukharin stood little chance. Nice guys finish last! If it had not been Stalin, it would have been the second most cruel and brutal leader vying for the job. We do not know who: Zinoviev, Molotov, Kaganovich?

Stalin’s opponents made one fatal miscalculation: They did not understand the depths of his paranoia, lust for power, and his lack of conscience. None realized until too late that they were battling literally for their lives.

Stalin may have had rivals in the brutality category (Trotsky and Zinoviev), but they lacked his planning and organizational abilities. Even they were somewhat restrained by moral principles. Of all the potential successors to Lenin, Stalin had the comparative advantage in cruelty that Hayek felt would be the determining factor in a power struggle in a single party regime with pervasive state involvement in the economy. Bukharin had the least comparative advantage in the brutality category. He had no chance whatsoever.

After his political defeat in April of 1929, Bukharin hoped for a quiet life of writing and teaching. To the disgruntlement of his allies, Bukharin decided that his path to survival was to withdraw from political discourse. He severed ties with former allies and followers. He would convince Stalin that he deserved to be left alone on account of his “good behavior.” How Bukharin conducted himself made little difference. For Stalin the motto was: “Once an enemy, always an enemy.”

The historical literature, with few exceptions, argues that Bukharin was innocent of the charges on which he was executed. This literature is correct if we judge his guilt by participation in actual murders, assassination plots, or espionage. These charges were pure fiction. It is another question entirely to ask whether Bukharin was guilty of a capital offense according to Stalin’s standards? In an absolute dictatorship, the dictator defines what is a crime and what is not.⁷ In Stalin’s mind loose talk of “removal”, idle threats issued in a drunken stupor, or even wishful thinking that he would die were crimes against the state, deserving of execution. If we take this standard, Bukharin was guilty. During the dekulakization campaign, he surely would have been rooting for Stalin’s

⁶ F. A. Hayek, The Road to Serfdom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944).

⁷ Paul Gregory, Terror by Quota (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), Chap. 3.

failure. He would have shared these thoughts with his closest colleagues. His “students” would have engaged in outbursts against Stalin. In the most private conversations, Bukharin and his closest friends would have shared their most innermost thoughts. One of the best records we have of this would be Kamenev’s notes, which Bukharin never really denied, which show the depths of disagreement and hatred of Stalin. When Bukharin’s friends and colleagues were interrogated, much of what they say about “talk” rings true. What strikes a false tone is when they describe plots and actions, which appear never to have taken place. Western jurisprudence would have required real acts, not idle talk, wishful thinking and bluster. For Stalin, this was enough.