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Exam focus

Edexcel: The making of modern Russia

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This resource presents a sample answer and commentary to an Edexcel-style question for paper 3, The making of modern Russia, 1855–1991.

Question

How accurate is it to say that the most important reason for Stalin's defeat of his opponents from 1924–29 was his role as general secretary of the party? (20 marks)

Answer with commentary

This question requires an explanation of the reasons for Stalin's victory in the power struggle, but it is asking you to assess the various reasons against the one stated in the question. The focus should be on comparing the role of his power base as general secretary to other factors, such as the weakness of his opponents.

Stalin had been general secretary of the party since 1922 and had used this power effectively to promote his supporters and to side-line opponents inside the party. This highlights how important this role was in facilitating his rise to power by 1929, showing the accuracy of the statement given in the question.

The candidate opens the paragraph with a clear link to the set question as well as a clear sense of where their judgement lies.

This was particularly effective since party membership had doubled in the three years under the Lenin enrolment. Many of the new members supported Stalin either out of gratitude or as the best means of advancing their careers. Crucial decisions regarding the direction in which the party should go were usually taken at the annual Party Congress and once he had been general secretary for a few years Stalin was able to pack this congress with his supporters and therefore win crucial decisions. For example, the 1927 congress backed Stalin's suggestion to begin a rapid drive towards industrialisation, spelling the end of the NEP and signalling Stalin's break with Bukharin and the right.

The other contenders to the leadership did not hold positions anywhere near as important as Stalin's and therefore it is accurate to say that this was the most important reason for his success.

In addition to his role as general secretary Stalin was also seen as a non-threatening bureaucrat — ‘Comrade Card Index’ — which made him seem a trustworthy option. By contrast, Trotsky was very much a left-wing radical, advocating world revolution and immediate industrialisation which gave him little chance of broadening his support base. Kamenev and Zinoviev were also associated with the left wing of the party, an impression reinforced when they formed the United Opposition against Stalin and Bukharin to oppose the continuation of the NEP in the 1920s. Meanwhile Bukharin was seen as representing the right wing of the party, because of his gradual approach to change. Stalin could put himself forward as a moderate who simply wanted to put Russia’s interests first.

The candidate continues to demonstrate their developed knowledge of the factor with comparisons made to Stalin’s opponents and their position within the party.

All of this evidence suggests that Stalin’s role as general secretary was the most important reason in securing his success as it allowed him to develop a much greater power base than his opponents.

The candidate ends the paragraph by again linking their point to the question and stating definitively the role played by the stated factor.

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