

Optimised Study Guide — Stalin's Rise to Power 1924–29

Optimised, exam-focused study guide for Stalin's rise to power 1924–29 (Unit 3, Elective 2, Component C05-U3E2). Grounded in the 2020–2025 SCSA exams and marking keys, especially the 2022 Q6 "Analyse the reasons behind Stalin's ascent to power by 1929." Covers Lenin's death and Testament, Stalin's administrative power base, the defeat of the Left then the Right, the permanent revolution v. socialism in one country debate, and the role of his rivals' mistakes. Leads with exam priorities and marking-key expectations.

How did a man Lenin himself wanted removed end up master of the USSR within five years of Lenin's death? Stalin's rise is a story of bureaucratic cunning, ideological manoeuvring, and — crucially — the blunders of rivals who underestimated him. This is a classic "analyse the factors" topic, and the examined essay is almost always some version of *why did Stalin win?*

The marking-key steer. The 2022 essay — "*Analyse the reasons behind Stalin's ascent to power by 1929*" — is rewarded most when candidates argue that victory came **not only from Stalin's own actions but also from the mistakes, weaknesses and failure of his opponents to recognise his ambitions**. A one-sided "Stalin was brilliant" essay scores less than one that weighs Stalin's strengths against his rivals' errors.

How this content is examined

- **Essays.** The reasons for Stalin's rise are a staple. You need a structured argument that ranks the factors (administrative power, ideology, divide-and-rule, rivals' mistakes).
- **Source analysis.** Sources on the succession struggle, Lenin's Testament or the Trotsky–Stalin rivalry require precise knowledge of party structures and the factional contest.

Answer the verb. Analyse = identify the reasons, show how they interacted, and weigh their relative importance. Don't just narrate 1924→1929; explain *why* each step worked.

1. The opening: Lenin's death and Testament (1924)

- **Lenin's death (Jan 1924)** opened a succession struggle with no agreed mechanism.
- **Lenin's Testament** criticised the leading contenders and specifically recommended Stalin's removal as General Secretary for being "too rude." Stalin's allies helped **suppress** it — a key

early escape. Stalin also outmanoeuvred Trotsky over Lenin's funeral, appearing as chief mourner while Trotsky was absent.

2. Stalin's institutional power base

This is the foundation of the answer — Stalin's "dull" administrative roles were in fact decisive:

- As **General Secretary**, and through the **Secretariat, Orgburo and Politburo**, Stalin controlled appointments, meeting agendas and the selection of delegates to Party congresses.
- **The "Lenin Enrolment" (1924–25)** flooded the party with over a million new, often poorly educated members who owed their position — and loyalty — to Stalin's machine.
- Result: by controlling *who was in the room and who voted*, Stalin could win Party decisions before debate began.

3. The ideological battleground

- **Permanent Revolution (Trotsky)**: the USSR must spread revolution abroad to survive.
- **Socialism in One Country (Stalin)**: build socialism within the USSR first. This was more reassuring and patriotic to a war-weary party and country — and helped paint Trotsky as a reckless adventurer.
- Debates over **economic policy** (the future of NEP) became the terrain on which Stalin destroyed first the Left, then the Right.

4. Divide and conquer (1924–29)

Stalin defeated his rivals in sequence, switching allies and using the **Ban on Factions** (from 1921) as a weapon to expel opponents for "factionalism":

- **Defeat of the Left (1924–27)**: Stalin allied with Zinoviev and Kamenev to isolate and discredit **Trotsky**. When Zinoviev and Kamenev then joined Trotsky in the "United Opposition," Stalin used the no-faction rule to expel them all (1927).
- **Defeat of the Right (1928–29)**: Stalin turned on his former allies **Bukharin, Rykov and Tomskey**, who defended the NEP, attacking them as a "Right deviation" while he adopted rapid industrialisation. By 1929, with every contender defeated, Stalin was supreme.

5. The rivals' mistakes (the factor examiners reward)

- **Trotsky** underestimated Stalin as a "grey blur," failed to use his own popularity, missed Lenin's funeral, and alienated the party with his arrogance.
- **Zinoviev and Kamenev** allied with Stalin against Trotsky — destroying the one man who could have stopped him — before realising their error too late.
- None of the rivals took Stalin's bureaucratic power seriously until it was decisive.

6. Historical perspectives

- **Stalin the master strategist** vs **Stalin the lucky beneficiary** of others' blunders.

- **Structure vs agency:** did the centralised, faction-banning party Lenin built make a Stalin-type outcome likely regardless of personalities?

7. Recurring exam question patterns & what high answers do

- **"Analyse the reasons for Stalin's rise to power by 1929."** High answers: weave together his administrative base, ideological positioning and divide-and-rule, *and* give real weight to his rivals' mistakes, then judge which mattered most.
- **"To what extent was Stalin's rise due to his own abilities?"** High answers: explicitly balance Stalin's agency against his opponents' errors and structural factors.

Recall self-test. Can you:

- Explain what Lenin's Testament said and how Stalin survived it?
- Name Stalin's key administrative posts and explain how each gave him power?
- Explain the "Lenin Enrolment" and why it mattered?
- Contrast Permanent Revolution with Socialism in One Country and explain why Stalin's was more appealing?
- Sequence the defeat of the Left then the Right, naming the figures at each stage?
- Explain how the Ban on Factions became a weapon?
- Give three specific mistakes by Stalin's rivals — and argue both "master strategist" and "lucky beneficiary" interpretations?