



## Chapter Eleven

# Bolshevik Discourse

### *Before and After*

#### Background

Until Lenin's death in January of 1924, the highest ruling body, the Politburo, operated on the principle of "democratic centralism." The key economic, political, and military decisions were to be made by the Politburo, but, within the Politburo, members could freely express their opinion. Once a Politburo majority or consensus was formed, however, Politburo members had to fall in line and support the decision.

Lenin's death without a designated successor set off a fierce power struggle from which an unlikely Politburo member, Joseph Stalin, emerged victorious. Stalin, who others underestimated as a dull party bureaucrat, used his position as party general secretary to set Politburo agendas and to control administrative appointments. Stalin's use of these bureaucratic levers allowed him to place his people in key party positions for working majorities in the Politburo and Central Committee. After removal of visible political opponents, the Politburo was left with Stalin loyalists, who had few independent thoughts of their own. At this point (around December of 1930), Stalin pretty much had his way within the Politburo, and by the mid-1930s no one dared to challenge him.

This chapter tells the tale of the demise of democratic centralism as Stalin consolidated his power. Once Stalin was, as his colleagues

would later call him, “master of the house,” he dictated the “unified party line” which other Bolshevik leaders automatically supported and adopted as their own. With Stalin dictating policy, no room was left for discussion or dissent. In fact, even the slightest “deviation” from Stalin’s unified party line came to be interpreted as “factionalism” or, even worse, as a crime against the state.

Two snapshots of Politburo meetings—the first from September 8, 1927, and the second of November 22, 1932—tell the tale of the slide from open Politburo discussion. In the September 1927 session, Stalin’s Politburo majority (which included his later victims Prime Minister Aleksei Rykov and Pravda editor Nikolai Bukharin) fought against the potent “united opposition” of Leon Trotsky, Lev Kamenev, and Grigory Zinovyev. In this fateful meeting, the United Opposition demanded that its own platform be presented to the upcoming party congress as an alternative to Stalin’s program. The discussion, as of September 1927, was open, frank, vitriolic, and profane as the two sides fought tooth and nail. Stalin’s side, as usual, won the day.

In the Politburo meeting of November 22, 1932, several mid-level party members stood accused of criticizing Stalin in private meetings in their apartments, dachas, on vacation, and at drinking parties. One of them, A. P. Smirnov, was an Old Bolshevik—a member of the Central Committee and deputy chair of the Russian Republic Government. Another purported critic was N. B. Eismont, deputy minister of trade for the Russian Republic. Their critical remarks had been reported to Stalin by two informants, longstanding members of the party Nikolskii and Savelev. The November 22, 1932, meeting was called to discuss the “treachery” of Smirnov and Eismont.

## The Transcripts of Politburo Meetings

Until Stalin’s consolidation of power, there were regular meetings of the Politburo. Although there was a requirement adopted in 1923 that verbatim transcripts of the major agenda items were to be kept, few transcripts were actually prepared, and only thirty-one are preserved. They have been published as *Stenograms of the Politburo of the Communist Party* in Russian as a joint project of the Hoover Institution and the Russian Archival Service<sup>1</sup> along with an analysis of these transcripts, *The Lost Transcripts of the Politburo*, in English.<sup>2</sup>

Stenographic accounts were taken of Politburo meetings at the request of Politburo members. After Stalin's consolidation of power, they were made only when he so decided. Before his ascendancy, any member of the Politburo could request such a transcript. Those in the minority often requested a transcript to have a written record of speeches and remarks.

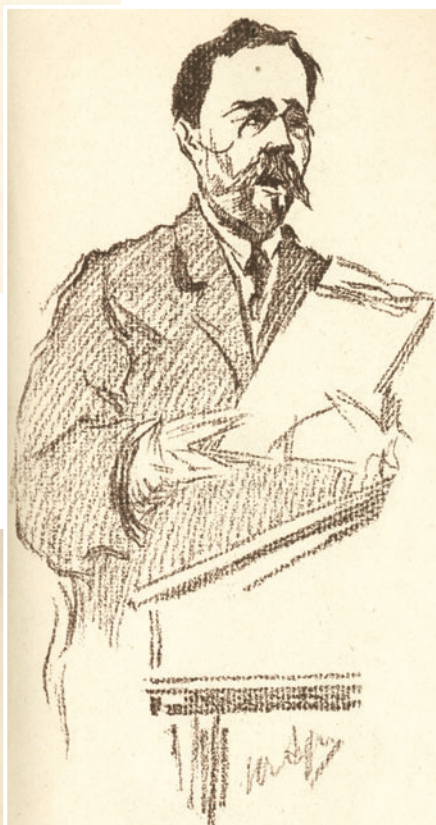
Politburo stenographic accounts were made to inform the party about Politburo decisions. After the meeting, each speaker was given a copy of his remarks for editing. Thereafter, the edited version of the meeting was bound in red-covered pamphlets for distribution to the party's Central Committee members or to an even broader group. These red pamphlets gave party members their marching orders with respect to the latest twists and turns in party policy.

Transcripts of Politburo meetings whose contents were judged too sensitive (such as revealing wide splits within the party leadership) were not distributed or were limited to a select few party leaders. The transcript of the September 8, 1927, meeting was prepared for distribution but then withheld as too sensitive. Stalin insisted on preparing the transcripts of the November 22, 1932, meeting to send the word to party members that not the slightest criticism of his policies was to be permitted.

## **No Holds Barred: Stalin Versus Trotsky, September 8, 1927**

The denouement of the struggle of the "United Opposition" headed by Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinovyev, and Lev Kamenev against the Politburo majority headed by Stalin, Nikolai Bukharin, and Aleksei Rykov, survives in a verbatim account of the proceedings of September 8, 1927. At the time of this meeting, Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinovyev were no longer members of the Politburo (Kamenev had been demoted to candidate member; the others excluded). The most severe sanction lay ahead of them: They were expelled from the party in November and December of 1927. Kamenev and Zinovyev were executed in the first Moscow Show Trial in 1936. Trotsky was executed in Mexico by an assassin sent by Stalin in 1940.

The issue being debated was the opposition's demand that its alternative platform be published and sent out to party members in preparation for the upcoming party congress. The opposition cited the Politburo under Lenin, when, they claimed, alternative views



Sketches of the United Opposition:  
 (TOP) Leon Trotsky,  
 (CENTER) Grigory Zinoviev,  
 (BOTTOM) Lev Kamenev.



could be freely expressed. The ruling majority, on the other hand, rejected the publication of the opposition platform, citing formal party rules on timetables and the fact that an alternative program would create a second party and destroy the “existing dictatorship of the proletariat.” Stalin, as the general secretary of the Central Committee, controlled the agenda. In this case, he invited allies from the Central Control Commission to overwhelm the outgunned Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinovyev.

The short excerpt from the seventy-one page transcript shows Stalin’s mastery of bureaucratic detail, his debating skills, and the vituperative atmosphere that existed within the Politburo at this time. It also shows Stalin’s practice of speaking not for himself but for the “workers” that he represented. Stalin’s opponents employ all their heavy weapons: They accuse him of incompetence as a civil war military leader, and they even cite Lenin’s “Political Testament” in which he recommends Stalin’s removal. Their most general charge is that Stalin has stifled discussion within the party and will not let alternate views be expressed. Stalin’s response is that the Politburo and Central Committee (which he controls) are the party, and “the party,” not individuals, decides what is to be presented to the party membership for discussion. The meeting ends with resolutions barring the opposition from distributing its platform or from having contacts with foreign communists who might publicize their ideas.

The excerpts begin after a rather lengthy statement by Stalin defending himself from opposition charges of incompetence during the civil war. The chairman is Stalin ally Ian Rudzutak.<sup>3</sup>

CHAIRMAN: Comrade Stalin, your time has run out.

VOICES: Extend his time.

TROTSKY: Give him another five minutes.

CHAIRMAN: Are there objections?

TROTSKY: Of course not, let him speak.

STALIN: Comrade Trotsky demands equality between the Central Committee, which carries out the decisions of the party, and the opposition, which undermines these decisions. A strange business! In the name of what organization do you have the audacity to speak so insolently with the party?

ZINOVYEV: Each member of the party has the right to speak before the party congress, and not only organizations.

STALIN: I think that it is not permitted to speak so insolently as a turncoat to the party.

ZINOVYEV: Don't try to split us; don't threaten.

STALIN: You are splitting yourselves off. This is your misfortune. The combined plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission ruled to allow open discussion a month before the congress [only] after publication of the theses of the Central Committee. Why do Trotsky and Zinovyev remain silent on this point? They want to violate the decision of the combined plenum and open discussion three months before the congress! Is it really difficult to understand that the Central Committee will not take this anti-party step, that the Central Committee will honor the decision of the combined plenum as well as the resolution of the tenth and thirteenth congresses about the rules of discussion of the platform?

They talk about Bonapartism. What is Bonapartism? It is the attempt of the minority to subject the majority to its will by force. Who, besides eccentrics, could assert that the majority of our party binds itself to its will by way of force? Surely that is stupid. If there is a possible effort at Bonapartism, that can only come from the side of the opposition, because it represents an insignificant minority, and probably will not have one delegate at the party congress.

TROTSKY: Evidently [ironically, meaning Stalin will make sure of that].

STALIN: . . . They scorn us, saying that we are afraid of the truth, that we are against free discussion. This is nonsense, Comrades. Look at the stenograms of the combined plenum. There are three editions, about one thousand pages. We distributed 8,000 copies. There are the speeches of the defenders of the party line and of its opponents. The workers have the opportunity to compare and make their decision. Where is the fear of the truth? And what has the opposition offered that is new in its so-called "platform" in addition to its speeches in these stenograms? Absolutely nothing new! Why do they insist on new discussions? Because they want to disorganize the party, to prevent us from carrying out positive work and to create the impression that the party is unstable. But we cannot deprive ourselves of positive work for the sake of the whims of the opposition. Maybe, for the opposition, positive work represents an

unnecessary luxury, but we can't allow the harmful illusion that the party is turning into a discussion club, that the party is unstable and so on. We cannot do this, first, because it does not correspond to reality, second, it contradicts our conception of the party, and third, we are surrounded by armed enemies. And then, the opposition has the crazy idea to write a lengthy brochure, and they want us to respond, so that this battle becomes known abroad and creates the impression of weakness in our party.

TROTSKY: Those from *Pravda* know that there is only a pretense of discussion.

STALIN: They say that under Lenin there was a different regime, that under Lenin they did not send away the opposition, did not deport them, etc. You have a weak memory, Comrades from the opposition. Don't you remember that Lenin proposed to send Comrade Trotsky to the Ukraine? Comrade Zinovyev, is this true or not? Why are you silent?

ZINOVYEV: I am not under interrogation by you (laughter, bell of the chairman).

TROTSKY [playing his trump card]: And you hide Lenin's "testament"? Lenin in his "testament" revealed everything about Stalin. Stalin is completely revealed. There is nothing to add or subtract.

STALIN: You lie if you assert that anyone is concealing the "testament" of Lenin. You know well that it is known to all the party. You know also, as does all the party, that Lenin's testament demolishes exactly you, the current leader of the opposition. . . . Further, is it not true that under Lenin Comrades Tomsy and Sokol'nikov were sent away to other regions, to Turkistan and to other places? True or not? Is it true or not that Lenin in such a decisive moment as the October Revolution demanded the expulsion of Comrades Zinovyev and Kamenev from the party? Is this a fact or not? What does this all tell us? It tells us that Lenin recognized the necessity of repression no better or worse than the Central Committee of our party. Judge now the value of your idle chatter about the regime of the party.

. . . And the opposition demands that we publish these and other such defamations of the party. Consider what would happen if we really did publish them. The bourgeoisie of the West, learning of Trotsky and Zinovyev's false statement that our party is ready for any and every concession, will pressure us even more . . . [repetition



eliminated, author] . . . and we will not be able delay war for even a few years. Such is the likely result of opposition demagoguery if their vile defamation is published. Is it really possible for such people to speak about our party in such a fashion without appearing as enemies of our party and government?

ZINOVYEV: If you say we are Chamberlain's agents, does this help our government or Chamberlain? Of course, it helps Chamberlain [British prime minister].

STALIN: No one called you an agent of Chamberlain, but understand how blinded you have become in your factional struggle. But understand to what degree you have lost your sight in your factional struggle, the degree to which you have shut yourself in your sorry factional shell, the degree to which you have lost your heads in your battle against the party that you are prepared to write a false denunciation of the party. Is it possible for a member of the party to speak against his own proletarian government, to falsely denounce the party, the government? . . . Only those who have joined the camp of our enemies could go so far. But we wish to pull you out of this dead end . . .

TROTSKY: You should pull your own self out of the swamp first. (Noise, shouting, the bell of the chairman.)

ZINOVYEV: You should get out of the dead end yourself. We are on Lenin's road, and you have left it.

STALIN: Allow yourself to scandalmonger, Comrade Zinovyev. You cannot escape from these decisions of the Comintern and the party. And people such as you demand that we publish their anti-party, scandalous, and false denunciation of our party for the benefit of capitalism, making our international position more difficult. Is it not clear that you have gone mad, demanding from us the impossible? Is it not clear that after this, the platform of the opposition is the platform of complete intellectual and political bankruptcy of petty bourgeois intellectuals gone wild?

CHAIRMAN: Comrade Iaroslavskii has the floor.

TROTSKY: Comrade Stalin spoke 25 minutes.

CHAIRMAN: Exactly 20 minutes.

TROTSKY: Comrade Stalin spoke 24 minutes.

CHAIRMAN: Your watch must be more reliable than the sun. Comrade Iaroslavskii has the floor.



## Keep Quiet and Survive

The November 27, 1932, Politburo session is in marked contrast to the no-holds-barred September 1927 meeting. Whereas in September of 1927, Trotsky, Kamenev, and Zinovyev were prepared to levy the most serious charges against Stalin in the most unrestrained language, the November 27, 1932, session was called to condemn criticism of Stalin, made in private conversations behind closed doors. To speak ill of Stalin even in private had become a crime against the state.

The Politburo session was called after denunciations and the interrogations of several mid-level party officials (N.B. Eismont, the head of trade of the Russian Republic and V.N. Tolmachev, a former head of the Russian Republic interior ministry), which implicated a member of the Central Committee, A. P. Smirnov, who was called to the meeting to defend himself.

They were charged with forming an “illegal faction” in informal meetings in private apartments or dachas, during which Stalin’s industrialization and collectivization programs were questioned. Accusations of “illegal meetings and illegal discussions” were submitted to the Central Committee (probably by Stalin himself), and the accused (Eismont and Tolmachev) were interrogated by the OGPU. The accused characterized these meetings as purely social and suggested that many of them were drunk at the time. Private or not, repeated or not, drunk or not, the Politburo’s decision was that such meetings constituted the formation of an “anti-party group.” Eismont and Tolmachev were expelled from the party, and their cases were turned over to the OGPU. Smirnov’s case was sent for further investigation by the Politburo.

Smirnov and Tolmachev were executed during Stalin’s Great Terror. Eismont was spared this fate by a fatal automobile accident before the Great Terror.

The following excerpt from the stenogram of the Politburo meeting starts with Smirnov’s assertion that these accusations were “absolute lies.”<sup>4</sup> As the meeting progresses, the desperation of Smirnov grows as he understands the seriousness of his situation and sees the piling on of Stalin’s associates. The attack is led by Stalin loyalists—his deputy, Lazar Kaganovich, his trade minister, Anastas Mikoian, and his heavy industry minister, Sergo Ordzhonikidze.

KAGANOVICH: Here is the declaration of Tolmachev [from his OGPU interrogation]: “Smirnov, as always, railed against the measures of the party leadership, although Eismont did not say anything that was anti-party. . . .”

SMIRNOV: I declare that this is absolute slander. I assure you. Let them interrogate us. We never met. I repeat a third time: this did not happen.

KAGANOVICH: Let’s return to matters of substance. How was this profanity against the policies of the Central Committee and leadership expressed?

SMIRNOV: They are absolute lies.

STALIN: Comrade Smirnov. Place yourself in the position of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission. Comrade Savelev—an old party member, you know that he is an honest person, comes to the Central Committee, and says that Nikolskii, a member of the party, came to him and said this and that, and that he wrote it down. He told Nikolskii that this was a serious business, and that he must inform the Central Committee. In this conversation—his letter relates the conversation between Eismont and Nikolskii—it was said that there is a group which has set as its goal a fundamental change in the party line—that Stalin is confused. But the matter is not only Stalin, of course. The group has as its goal a fundamental change in the party line; they say, that the current party line is leading to the collapse of the country . . . that it is necessary to remove Stalin, displace him or remove him, whatever, that the situation is worsening. This is an anti-party action, this group became particularly agitated after the Northern Caucas events. Comrade Savelev reports to us about this matter and we have no reason to doubt his veracity. He is simply explaining what Nikolskii told him, whose honesty no one can doubt. We checked him out.

MIKOYAN: I know him for a long time. He is an honest man who would not lie.

ORDZHONIKIDZE: I also know him.

STALIN: He is not a gossip.

SMIRNOV: And I am a scoundrel?

STALIN: No, no, wait a minute. Just place yourself in our position. How should we proceed? An honest person—you say that you

know him somewhat. I know him a little and not from a bad side. We sent him as an engineer to prepare a road in 1918. He never poked around intelligence circles so that he would fit in—one can't assert that he wanted to benefit himself. And Nikolskii told this honest man about his conversation with Eismont, who was trying to recruit him. Another honest man—Savelev—laid all this out in his letter. Following this, we receive another letter, already certified by Nikolskii, with some amendment to the first letter. What should the Central Committee and Central Control Commission do in this situation?

SMIRNOV: It is clear that they should investigate.

STALIN: Of course. You must know that it is unpleasant for us to move against Foma [Eismont?]. But how should the Central Committee, if it respects itself, and how should the Central Control Commission act when it has two documents from two respected and honest party members. They must investigate. Eismont must be interrogated. His statement is a little confusing but in the main it confirms: Yes, Smirnov and we were very dissatisfied with the policy of the Central Committee; Smirnov complained about the policy of the Central Committee—we already know about this a long time, we received this information from various sources. We know Smirnov; if there is something that he does not like, he will scream and complain about it. But this is a different situation—do they want to change the policy of the Central Committee? It is indeed possible to change the policy, declaring directly—I am a member of the party; you are making a mistake. But they want to change the policy of the Central Committee by creating an illegal group and use words like “remove, replace”—that is, they want something in this fashion. . . . The Central Committee and the Central Control Commission, if they respect themselves, have no choice but to call a meeting and check this out. Now we must check you out. If three confirm the same thing, then you must speak honestly.

SMIRNOV: Let me continue. I am speaking seriously. They were with me only two times; there were other people present. We did not gather and discuss. I again assert this and I am literally trying to prove this. Second. I assert this not only to throw out empty phrases. Comrade Stalin, for me this is not some kind of game. Moreover, one of these comrades I have known since I was a child, even in

banishment—Tolmachev. I did not discuss politics with him. I declare one more time that I did not criticize the policy of the party with these comrades, but I spoke in terms of those measures that we should conduct. To give the appearance of criticizing the general party line is incomprehensible to me and to be accused of this is particularly hard on *me*.

STALIN: You can hold to a negative line, but you must tell the Central Committee about this. When you act against the party and gather together people illegally to destroy the party—this is incorrect. Three are speaking out against you. God help you if what you say is correct.

## Party Lines, Dictators, and Information

By November of 1932, any person in the Soviet Union holding an official position in the party or state had to be very careful about what he or she said. The Eismont, Tolmachev, and Smirnov case showed that people could not gather privately and express even the slightest reservations about Stalin's policies. They could be overheard. There could be moles in their midst. As Stalin advised, those with doubts should speak directly to Stalin or his Politburo, but that would mean the end of their careers or worse.

It was just such a climate of fear that Stalin, as absolute dictator, wished to create. His few independent and outspoken associates would be initially praised for their candor but would soon find themselves without a job or with a bullet in the back of their heads.

Dictators, however, need to know the truth. If none of their associates are willing to speak out, especially to deliver unpleasant information, the dictator suffers from the curse of poor information. Economic, social, and political systems cannot function without correct information. Policies cannot be improved unless their defects are known and discussed.