Historical Crisis: The Death of Stalin

Chairs: Griffin Seidel ’21
Rapporteur: Melanie Tapia ’22
Hello Delegates,

Welcome to the CAMUN 2020 Historical Crisis committee: The Death of Stalin. My name is Griffin Seidel, and I will be your chair for this committee. I am a junior at Concord Academy and this is my third year being part of CAMUN. Alongside me will be Melanie Tapia, a CA sophomore, as Rapporteur.

Our committee will deal with addressing the complicated political situation left in the wake of Stalin’s death. The committee will be made up of the Soviet Union’s most prominent leaders at the time, and we’ll consider a variety of issues, including how Stalin should be remembered, how loyal the new leadership should be to Stalin’s vision, and most importantly, who will succeed Stalin.

This situation will provide you with the opportunity to pursue your own agenda, trying to strengthen yourself in the new regime and possibly maneuver your way to leadership, while also offering you the chance to decide what direction the USSR will take. You will have to make pacts with your fellow comrades and use your personal directives effectively in order to survive the power vacuum. While some delegates may have more humble aspirations, others will attempt to pursue more ambitious endeavors, and you must consider how the interests and personality that you represent will influence your actions during this period of political upheaval.

In order to help debate be as productive as possible, all delegates should email us a position paper no longer than one page double-spaced prior to the conference. If you would like feedback on yours, please submit it by Tuesday, March 31st, 2020. Good luck, and I look forward to seeing you all at the conference!

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**Stalin’s Rise to Power**

Joseph Stalin was born on December 18, 1878, in Gori, Georgia, in the Russian Empire. In 1903, he joined Lenin’s Bolsheviks, inspired by Karl Marx’s writings, and made his way into Lenin’s inner circle. Stalin was actively involved in the Russian Civil War (1918-1920), and was later appointed as Secretary General of the Central Committee, where he used this role to position himself ahead of his political rivals. When Lenin died in 1924, Stalin began outmaneuvering his opponents, forming and betraying multiple alliances, eventually forcing all his opponents into exile or arranging their executions. This political savvy is what allowed him to maintain his firm control over the Soviet Union for so long. As Premier of the Soviet Union, he began a brutal process of overnight industrialization in which peasants were forced to collectivize under the control of the state, and any who refused were arrested, killed, or sent to work camps, a precedent the Premier would continually uphold for any form of dissent. Although the industrialization yielded economic benefits and catapulted the Soviet Union to the world stage, it came at a great cost with an estimated 10 million dead.1

**The Gulag System and the Purges**

Gulags were Soviet penal labor colonies often established in the harsh conditions of Siberia. The country sent its criminals, purged members of the party and military, resistant peasants, prisoners of war, marginalized ethnic groups, rich people, and many who were entirely innocent, to the Gulag camps. Members of any group that Stalin wanted out of the equation were sent to these camps and forced to work under extremely harsh conditions, while driven to near starvation and under constant threat of execution. It is approximated that 10 million people were sent to the Gulags and that 1.5 million ultimately died in the camps.2

The fuel for the Gulags came from Stalin’s purges, the first of which was in 1934 when top official Sergey Kirov was assassinated, giving Stalin the reason he needed to begin purifying his ranks and eliminating rivals. Stalin’s secret police, the NKVD, would fabricate evidence against his enemies and would subjugate them to show trials, exile to work camps, and execution. Beyond members of the party, Stalin’s purges persecuted the elite of the country, artists, lawyers, academics as well as anyone who had close ties to purged individuals. Through a system that forced many to rat out or frame neighbors and family members, no one was truly safe. Many innocent people were executed and sent to work camps. These purges were continually carried out until Stalin’s death.3

**Stalin’s Cult of Personality**

Through control of the media and propaganda, Stalin was able to position himself as a hero of the Soviet Union, lauded for his great achievements but never criticized for his failings. His rapid industrialization was celebrated for its success. Stalin was celebrated as a hero for winning World War II, but there was no discussion of the disastrous first years of the war, and he was never implicated in its sheer human cost. To criticize Stalin was to attack the very foundation of the Soviet Union; anyone who dared to was either

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2 [https://www.britannica.com/place/Gulag](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gulag)
3 [https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Purge](https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Purge)
executed or sent to Gulags no matter their position or status. From the peasantry to the highest level of
the party, no one dared question Stalin, but after Stalin was gone, would his successors still maintain their
loyalty to his ideals?

The Council of Ministers and the Inner Circle
The Council of Ministers were the top members of the Communist Party who ran the country and were
Stalin’s closest advisors; however not even they were safe from Stalin’s purges. These ministers had to be
incredibly careful about how they acted around Stalin, and many would go to great lengths to stay on
Stalin’s good side, never disagreeing with or disrespecting him. While Lavrentiy Beria gained favor
through his work carrying out all of Stalin’s purges, Nikita Khrushchev would carefully plan each joke he
told in Stalin’s presence. You delegates will be these ministers, and while not all of you were historically
part of the Council of Ministers, each of you holds significant authority over parts of the Soviet Union,
and your inclusion is meant to enhance the experience of this committee. See below for descriptions of
each of your positions, along with crisis notes and personal/joint directives.

Stalin’s Death
Stalin was found on his bedroom floor on March 1st, 1953, having suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. He lay
there for almost a day, with his guards and house staff too afraid to anger Stalin by disturbing him. A few
members of the Council of Ministers were the first to arrive, yet none of them wanted to call a doctor due
to an ongoing purge of doctors, and the ministers didn’t want to be implicated. Ultimately a doctor was
called but it was of no use by that point. Stalin had passed the point of no return and died on March 5th.4

Stalin’s Children and Legacy
Stalin’s legacy will be one of the most important issues this committee will address. At the time of Stalin’s
death, he was still revered by the public as a hero of World War II and the father of the nation. However,
many were dissatisfied with life under Stalin, leaving a complicated situation for his successors. If
members of this committee try to maintain Stalin’s legacy as a hero, how will they address his
shortcomings and failings without implicating themselves? Trying to discredit Stalin could result in
angering the public and or losing control of the country. This applies to any reforms and repeals of
Stalin’s policies, so committee members will need to be mindful of how the public and other members of
the party and military may respond to their actions.

Other important elements of Stalin’s legacy to be mindful of are his two children, who will interact with
the committee. While members of this committee may be the true successors to Stalin, his children are the
symbolic successors, and thus their actions can greatly affect the crisis. Stalin’s daughter, Svetlana, is
beloved by the people, and winning her trust and support will be crucial to securing legitimacy. Stalin’s
son, Vasily, is a raging alcoholic whose drunken antics and mad ravings could prove to be a danger to
committee delegates. The fate of Stalin’s children is up to the committee to decide, whether they be sent
away, kept under close watch, or some other fate.

4 https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-death-stalin-180965119/
Committee Positions

Georgy Malenkov, Acting Chairman of the Council of Ministers
Stalin’s longtime deputy premier, and right-hand man with regard to policy, Malenkov has a right to the title of Acting Premier, and is technically in charge of the Soviet Union’s cabinet. Malenkov is largely the public figurehead for the Soviet government and the apparent successor to Stalin. The fact that he is regarded by the public as Stalin’s apparent successor allows him considerable influence and reliable connections, but he cannot take totalitarian actions such as the dismissal of others in government or the unilateral passage of policy.

Nikolai Bulganin, Minister of Defense
Bulganin is a longtime prominent Soviet political and military leader who held high-ranking positions during World War II, as Colonel-General and Deputy Commissar for Defense. He holds the high rank of Marshal and is in charge of all policy actions relevant to the military.

Vyacheslav Molotov, Minister of Foreign Affairs
Molotov is a rigidly devoted Stalinist who is most notable for his negotiation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact. Though Molotov always remained a staunch supporter of Stalin and Stalinism, he fell out of Stalin’s favor in his later years, having been demoted to lower roles and publicly criticized by Stalin. Stalin was even set to order Molotov’s execution in a new Purge but he died before he could execute his plan. Despite all this, Molotov publicly remains a passionate and consistent defender of Stalin and Stalinist governance.

Lazar Kaganovich, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers
Kaganovich is one of Stalin’s oldest associates and most reliable allies, and was instrumental in both the October Revolution of 1917 and Stalin’s rise to power in the 1920s. In the past, he held the positions of Commissar for Transport and First Secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine. He ruthlessly executed Stalin’s orders during the Great Purge, appearing as a documented signatory to 188 executions during its peak three years. As an “Old Bolshevik,” Kaganovich has extensive connections throughout Soviet politics and is arguably Stalin’s most loyal right-hand figure. As Deputy Premier, he holds influence in all corners of the Communist Party and his advice is very highly sought after due to his considerable experience.

Maksim Saburov, Chairman of Gosplan
Saburov is a career bureaucrat who is demonstrably loyal to the Communist Party, and skilled at keeping himself in positions of economic power. Since 1949, he has been the Chairman of Gosplan, a position equivalent to a Minister of Economy but with considerably more influence on the success or failure of his country’s economy than most due to the Soviet political-economic structure. Gosplan is the agency which outlines and executes the economic five-year plans and other economic policies through the Soviet Union. As its chairman, Saburov has been credited with much of the Soviet Union’s post-World War II reconstruction.
Anastas Mikoyan, Minister of Foreign Trade
One of the last of the Leninist “Old Bolsheviks,” Mikoyan was an early Stalin ally and confidant who supported and aided Stalin’s rise to power. However, the more traditionalistic Mikoyan had privately fallen out of favor with the dictator in his last days; Stalin even believed that Mikoyan was plotting against him and, like Vyacheslav Molotov, Mikoyan had been publicly criticized by Stalin and secretly placed on the list to be “purged,” only for Stalin die before confirming the purge list. Mikoyan is a skilled diplomat and negotiator who has been charged with foreign trade.

Panteleimon Ponomarenko, Minister of Culture
Ponomarenko is a relatively new minister, made Minister of Culture after a career as First Secretary of the Belarusian Communist Party, which included leading Soviet troops in Belarus in World War II. He was also a deeply repressive leader of Belarus, enforcing the will of Moscow even more harshly than Stalin’s wishes. As Minister of Culture, Ponomarenko is responsible for tight management of the cultural affairs and activities within the USSR—all of which are commanded by the Party and tightly controlled by the government in accordance with the Party.

Nikolai Psurtsev, Minister of Communications
Psurtsev is a veteran of both the Russian Civil War and World War II, whose successful experience in military communications in the latter earned him an appointment as Minister of Communications in 1948. As the minister, Psurtsev has authority over all communications and broadcasting within the country, including mail, telegraph, telephone, public radio, and television, and the distribution of propaganda.

Konstantin Gorshenin, Minister of Justice
Gorshenin was a loyal and extreme enforcer of domestic discipline and non-dissent during World War II, which earned him Stalin’s good graces and the post of Minister of Justice, which he has held since 1948. Gorshenin is a newer member of the party and more opportunistic than ideological. As Minister of Justice, Gorshenin is in charge of the Soviet judicial system, including the courts and prisons, but not law enforcement, which is charged to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) under Beria.

Arseny Zverev, Minister of Finance
Arseny Zverev has been the Soviet Union’s financial chief since 1938, achieving the position after an extensive rise in prominence from a young Red Army captain in the Russian Civil War to the country’s highest financial post. The Ministry of Finance is charged with the Soviet government’s budgetary matters and government revenue, which can come from both taxation and confiscation of property. The Ministry of Finance coordinates with Gosplan (headed by Maksim Saburov) on the writing and execution of economic plans, to ensure that all such plans are financially viable for the regime.

Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Moscow Regional Committee
A protégé of Lazar Kaganovich and a leading figure within the Communist Party, Khrushchev worked his way into Stalin’s good graces in the 1930s. For his own safety, Khrushchev carefully swallowed his many
issues with Stalinism, particularly the violent repression of political dissent and cultural differences. Stalin named Khrushchev as his appointed regional executive of the Moscow metropolitan area, placing Khrushchev in a position of regional power where he controls the day to day running of the city and all that entails. Throughout his career, he has quietly maintained reformist goals that he can now pursue after Stalin’s death.

**Georgy Zhukov, Marshal**
Georgy Zhukov is an iconic military leader and war hero, best known for having been the Deputy Commander in-Chief of Soviet Armed Forces, behind Stalin himself, in World War II, during which Marshal Zhukov was the USSR’s equivalent to the United States’ General Dwight Eisenhower. Zhukov was close enough with Stalin that he was one of the very few individuals who could speak honestly and critically about the dictator without fear of consequences—and he did, even in Stalin’s presence. The popular Marshal’s freedom to speak and act frankly only increases after Stalin’s demise, especially as he has the loyalty of most of the Red Army.

**Lavrentiy Beria, Head of MVD**
Beria was the head of Stalin’s secret police for much of his regime, heading up the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) and eventually the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). He was heavily involved in Stalin’s purges and was known to be a perverse and sadistic in his actions. Near Stalin’s death it is believed that Beria grew resentful of Stalin and became increasingly more ambitious and eager to take his place. He is incredibly manipulative and wicked and has the complete loyalty of his secret police.

**Aleksandr Vasilevsky, Marshal and Deputy Defense Minister**
Vasilevsky was a Soviet top general during World War II, involved in many military campaigns, and he has significant influence in the military. He was the former Defense Minister in the years before Stalin’s death but fell from grace and was replaced by Nikolai Bulganin. He is now the Deputy Defense Minister, still retaining sway in military matters.

**Ivan Konev, Marshal**
Konev was a key Soviet marshal during World War II and a close colleague and supporter of Stalin. His career was greatly supported by Stalin and he was one of Stalin’s favourite generals. He was a bit of a rival of Zhukov, having replaced him as head of Soviet ground forces. Although he later lost this position, Stalin’s death has brought Konev to the forefront of Soviet politics once again, where he can use his military influence to find allies in this period of upheaval.
**Questions to Consider**

1. How can you secure your place at the top of the party?
2. What reforms and actions fit with your vision for the Soviet Union and/or are in your best interests?
3. Will the party remain bound to its Stalinist principles, return to its Leninist roots, or become something else entirely?
4. Will other delegates be willing to cooperate with you in this struggle?
5. How should Stalin be remembered and will you uphold his vision for the country?
6. What if any disenfranchised groups should be brought back into the fold?
7. What should become of the purges and Gulag system?

**Resources for Further Research**

1. *The Death of Stalin* movie, which is a satirization of the events but is fairly historically accurate in its portrayal and can give you a general idea of who your delegate is and what might occur. *(Note: this film is rated R, mostly for bad language, but there is one slightly disturbing scene.)*
2. [http://www.orlandofiges.info/index.php](http://www.orlandofiges.info/index.php): sections 10-15 are good background and section 16 lists the events of this committee; you don’t need to read all of it.
4. [https://www.britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com) and [https://www.encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com) are good sources for info about the members of this committee.