The month of August should have been a high point in Stalin’s career. By default or design, the other party leaders were out of action or silenced, leaving him a clear field in which to perform. Instead, August for Stalin was a period of missed opportunities, faulty judgments, and a relapse into obscurity, for reasons well defined by Trotsky:

The revival of the mass movement and the return to activity of the CC members who had been temporarily removed from it naturally threw Stalin out of the position of prominence he held during the July congress. From then on, his activities were carried on in obscurity, unknown to the masses, unnoted by the enemy.¹

Citing a four-volume chronicle of the revolution published by Istpart in 1924, Trotsky adds,

Stalin was not mentioned even once. Stalin’s name is not even in the index of approximately 500 proper names. In other words, throughout those two months [August and September], the press did not take cognizance of anything he did or of a single speech he gave, and not one of the more or less prominent participants in the events of those days mentioned his name even once.²
Sources for Party History in August and Early September

For the historian of the revolution and the biographer of Stalin, August 1917 is an oasis of documentation in the desert of missing or nonavailable sources. Beginning with the Central Committee session of August 4 and continuing into the early months of 1918, we have a series of well-kept, orderly protocols of the CC's meetings—forty-six in all, of which more than half—twenty-nine—took place before the Bolshevik seizure of power.

In addition to the CC protocols, we have Stalin's writings. During August Stalin made twenty contributions to the party press, varying from brief notes to fairly extensive articles and editorials. These were published, and presumably written, on an almost day-to-day basis. The longest interval of silence between items is four days (August 9–13).

A striking feature of Stalin's output in August is that none of the writings carried any indication of authorship. Not until September 6 did Stalin again begin using his party pseudonym, either in full or in abbreviation (“K.St.” on September 6, “K. Stalin” on September 9, “K.” on September 12). Thus, in August he failed to take advantage of one of the legitimate means available to him of keeping his name before the public and marking out his own specific analysis of the revolution. Trotsky, himself a brilliant journalist, delivered a withering but not unjustified verdict on Stalin's journalistic endeavors in August and September:

There is practically nothing to say about Stalin's newspaper work during that period. He was the editor of the central organ, not because he was a writer by nature, but because he was not an orator, and simply did not fall into any public activity. He did not write a single notable article; did not pose a single new subject for discussion; did not introduce a single slogan into general circulation. His comments on events were impersonal, and strictly within the framework of current Party views. He was a Party member assigned to a newspaper, not a revolutionary publicist.3

Deutscher gives faint praise to Stalin's newspaper work during this period for its “simple and incisive style” but cannot avoid a downgrading:

Stalin's writings were really the small change of Bolshevik propaganda.4

Formation and Functions of the Uzkii Sostav

The most important organizational task facing the new Central Committee was the establishment of the uzkii sostav, the policy-making
organ of the party, as provided for in the new party statutes. This matter was taken up at the first postcongress session of the CC on August 4. Stalin was present, as were Sverdlov, Bukharin, and Dzerzhinsky.

It was decided to fix the size of the uzkii sostav at eleven members (a proposal for a somewhat smaller body of nine members was voted down). In a display of the organizational talents he was developing, Stalin proposed that the uzkii sostav operate in accordance with a division of functions among its members. The proposal was adopted.

Membership of the uzkii sostav was settled at the following CC session, on August 5. Stalin and Sverdlov were obvious choices; the other members were Sokol’nikov, Dzerzhinsky, Milyutin, Uritsky, Ioffe, Muranov, Bubnov, Stasova, and Shaumian (not yet in Petrograd; until his arrival, Smilga). In choosing these individuals, the CC was acting in accordance with the principle that physical presence was indispensable for membership, rather than prestige or stature. Stalin was the only carry-over from the “April Bureau.”

Was the uzkii sostav a precursor of the Politburo, as Adam Ulam has suggested? The answer must be a qualified “yes,” in view of the fact that it was charged with functions of leadership and policy making similar to those of the later Politburo. In its membership, however, the uzkii sostav showed an almost willful disregard for the realities of power in the party. It was too large and too diverse to serve as an effective policy-making body. Omission of the party’s real leaders—Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Trotsky—and the inclusion of third- or fourth-ranking figures such as Milyutin and Muranov rendered it incapable of providing genuine leadership.

As matters turned out, the uzkii sostav led a short and not particularly noteworthy existence. The protocols record only seven sessions—on August 6, 8, 13, 14, 16, 20, and 23; thereafter its policy-making functions were taken over by the full CC. Except for his suggestion at the August 4 session, Stalin made no contribution to the work of the uzkii sostav which the secretary thought sufficiently important to include in the protocols. The eclipse of the uzkii sostav, with its variegated membership and its failure to include the party’s real leaders, was inevitable once these leaders resumed full-scale activity in September.

Establishment of the Secretariat

At its session on August 6, the Central Committee took a decision in regard to the Secretariat. That body was to deal with the organizational side of party work and to be composed of five members, all
drawn from the CC. Thus, the CC established an early precedent for the interlocking relationship between the two bodies. Those named as Secretariat members were Dzerzhinsky, Ioffe, Sverdlov, Muranov, and Stasova. No chairman was designated, but it was a foregone conclusion that Sverdlov would hold that position, *de facto* if not *de jure*.

Inasmuch as the Secretariat managed the organizational side of the CC’s work, it was inevitable that it would eventually become the dominant body in the party. The smooth functioning of the Secretariat under Sverdlov served to mask the inner workings of the party’s machinery. Certainly Stalin, in 1917, had no inkling of the uses to which the Secretariat could be put in building a personal machine. His failure to recognize its potential usefulness, reflected in his neglect of the opportunity to serve on the Secretariat (if he had wanted to, he could easily have pushed aside secondary figures such as Ioffe or Muranov), provides strong evidence of the gap between his ambition and his ability to win the commanding position from which that ambition could be realized.

Reorganizing the Party Press

One of the questions taken up by the Central Committee at its meeting on August 4 was the reorganization of the party’s publications. Action by the Provisional Government had led to the temporary closing down of *Pravda*. Meanwhile, the Military Organization was continuing to publish *Soldat*, and the Petersburg Committee was pressing hard for the right to publish its own newspaper. Under these circumstances, the CC decided to take over *Soldat* as the party’s official organ; neither the MO nor the PK, it was decided, should have its own newspaper. In the vote for the editorial board Stalin received the highest number of votes, 13, followed by Sokol’nikov and Milyutin, each of whom received 12 votes, making Stalin the senior editor.

The CC then took up the question of including Trotsky on the editorial board if he should be released from jail. By a slim margin (11 against, 10 for), the proposal was defeated. For Stalin, however, the reprieve was only temporary; freed on September 4, Trotsky showed up at a meeting of the CC two days later and was promptly named a member of the editorial board.

Party Publications

The question of party publications was taken up by the *uzkii sostav* at its eighth session held on August 20. Stalin figured in a number of
AUGUST

the assignments handed out. He was named a member of the five-man editorial board of Vpered, designed to serve as a popular propaganda organ of the CC. He was also chosen to serve on the editorial board of the party’s theoretical journal, Prosveshchenie, whose editorial line was defined as that of the Zimmerwald left wing. The party publishing house, Rabochii, was to be directed by the editorial board already set for Vpered, including Stalin.

Stalin’s membership on the editorial board of Prosveshchenie was extremely brief, however. Trotsky writes:

On the 6th of September—after my liberation from prison—Stalin and Ryazanov were replaced on the editorial board of the theoretical journal by Kamenev and me.11

Thus, another item was added to the growing list of Stalin’s grievances against Trotsky, all the more galling for Stalin in that it showed the party’s low estimate of his ability as a theorist in comparison with Trotsky and Kamenev. Deutscher comments:

After the [Sixth] Congress, when the imprisoned leaders, first Kamenev, then Trotsky, Lunacharsky and others were gradually released, Stalin again withdrew into the twilight of the coulisse.12

Kamenev under Suspicion

The first of the imprisoned Bolshevik leaders to be freed on bail was Kamenev, during the first week in August. It was to be nearly another month, however, before he resumed full-scale activity in the Bolshevik party and the Petrograd Soviet. The reason was a new charge against him. At its session on August 4, the CC heard a report by Nogin that rumors were circulating that Kamenev had collaborated with the Kiev office of the Okhrana, the tsarist secret police.13 If substantiated, the rumors would have put an inglorious end to Kamenev’s political career.

On August 10, the accusation was published by the Ministry of Justice and the bourgeois press. In view of the fact that Kamenev was a member of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the Soviet, that body had established a commission to investigate the rumors. At its session on August 6, the Bolshevik CC ordered Stalin to contact the commission.14

Kamenev was formally cleared of the charge on August 30 and immediately resumed full-scale political action, attending a session of the uzkii sostav on the day of his exoneration as well as taking on active participation in the Soviet CEC.
Kamenev Seizes the Initiative

At a session of the Central Executive Committee on August 31 Kamenev introduced a resolution, "On Power," which immediately became a rallying point for the Bolsheviks and for the radical left wing of the moderate socialist parties. Consideration and adoption of Kamenev's resolution was the sole item on the agenda of an enlarged meeting of the Bolshevik Central Committee on August 31, with representatives of the Bolshevik fraction of the CEC and of the Petrograd Soviet.

In his resolution, Kamenev called for a fundamental reorganization of state power. The Cadet party was to be excluded from the government, as were representatives of the upper classes in general. The government's policies of "compromise and irresponsibility" must be "fundamentally altered." The Provisional Government must be replaced by one "consisting of representatives of the revolutionary proletariat and peasantry." The new government must take the following measures:

1. Decreeing a democratic republic;
2. Immediate abolition of private property in gentry land without redemption and transfer of the land to management by peasant committees until a decision by the Constituent Assembly, with provision of tools for the poorest peasants;
3. Introduction of workers' control over production and distribution on a nation-wide scale. Nationalization of the most important branches of the economy, including oil, coal, and metallurgy. Ruthless taxation of large-scale capital and property and the confiscation of war profits;
4. Proclamation of the secret treaties as invalid and the immediate proposal to all the peoples of the belligerent nations of a general democratic peace.

"Immediate measures" to be taken included:

1. The halting of all repression of the working class and its organs. Abolition of the death penalty at the front and restoration of full freedom of agitation and of all democratic organizations in the army. Purge of the counter-revolutionary high command.
2. Electability of commissars and other officials by local organizations.
3. Establishment in practice of the rights of nations living in Russia; first of all, satisfaction of the demands of Finland and Ukraine.
4. Abolition of the State Council and the State Duma; immediate convocation of the Constituent Assembly.
5. Abolition of all class privileges; full equality of citizens.
Kamenev had done a thorough job. All that was missing from his resolution was an explicit call for a new revolution.

On August 31, the Bolshevik CC adopted Kamenev’s resolution without change. Stalin was present at the session that discussed and adopted it. The protocols record no individual statements, merely asserting that “all those present took part in the discussion.” It is noteworthy, however, that Stalin’s first recorded absence in August from sessions of the CC took place on the evening of the same day, August 31, and that he also missed the session of September 3. By his vigorous initiative Kamenev had put Stalin in the shade, and it is not surprising that Stalin’s attendance at CC sessions became irregular.

It was not only the Bolsheviks, however, who adopted Kamenev’s resolution. Later on the night of August 31, the Petrograd Soviet held a debate on the resolution which lasted through the night and which ended at 5:30 A.M. on September 1 with the rejection of an alternative SR proposal and the adoption of Kamenev’s resolution. As Rabino-witch points out,

The August 31 session marked the first occasion on which a clear majority of the deputies present voted with the Bolsheviks on any political issue.

The leftward shift still fell short, however, of affecting the top policy-making echelon in the Soviet. In a lengthy session that ended on September 2, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee rejected Kamenev’s resolution as well as an alternative presented by Martov on behalf of the Menshevik-Internationalists, adopting instead a resolution drafted by the centrist Mensheviks and the SR’s which favored the early convocation of the Constituent Assembly but which meanwhile pledged support to Kerensky’s newly hatched five-man Directory. The Bolshevik spokesmen in the debate were Kamenev and Ryazanov; Stalin, if present, kept silent.

Did Stalin collaborate with Kamenev in the preparation of the August 30 resolution? That possibility is suggested by an editorial, “We Demand!” published in the August 28 edition of Rabochii put’, unsigned but attributed to Stalin by the editors of his Works.

Comparison of Stalin’s editorial with Kamenev’s resolution reveals a high degree of similarity. Virtually every point in Stalin’s program reappears in Kamenev’s resolution. The principal differences lie in the organization and formulation of points. By shifting the proposals on land, workers’ control, and peace to a more prominent position, Kamenev sharpened the focus on three of the Bolsheviks’ principal slogans. Reflecting his greater familiarity with governmental agencies
and practices, Kamenev included a number of points entirely lacking from Stalin's list, for example, the electability of local government officials, abolition of the State Council and State Duma, and abolition of all class privileges.

The major difference between the two documents, however, lay in the use to which each was put. For all its comprehensiveness, Stalin's editorial remained a paper document, lacking even the author's signature to give it a personal stamp. By contrast, Kamenev's resolution was immediately absorbed into the political life of revolutionary Petrograd, first in the Bolshevik CC, then in the Petrograd Soviet, followed by full debate, though not adoption, in the Central Executive Committee.

What exactly was Stalin's role in this episode? The near identity of the two documents virtually rules out the possibility of coincidence. Did Stalin prepare a rough draft, which Kamenev then polished and presented publicly? Or did Stalin obtain a working draft of the document from Kamenev, directly or indirectly, and then present it as his own, cautiously hiding behind the screen of anonymity?

Whichever explanation one prefers, the episode is not one in which Stalin could take pride. If he did indeed have a hand in the document's preparation, why did he not acknowledge his part authorship, either by signing the August 28 editorial or by publicly identifying himself as coauthor of the resolution? To do so would have lent it added weight and authority—after all, Stalin was by now an established member of the Bolsheviks' leadership, and a Kamenev-Stalin resolution, openly sponsored by both men, would have carried more weight than one presented by either man alone.

In this episode, one fact stands out prominently: Stalin's caution, his reluctance to commit himself publicly, coupled with a willingness to let others take the risk and, if matters turned out favorably, reap the rewards of publicity and recognition.

By the end of August the tempo of revolutionary events was beginning to accelerate, creating conditions that favored those willing to gamble on an unknown future. This was not Stalin's style, however. The qualities and attributes that had hitherto served him were devalued in the climactic phase of the revolution now rapidly taking shape.

The Reemergence of Zinoviev

Zinoviev remained in hiding throughout most of August. At its ninth session, on August 30, the Central Committee took up a proposal by Zinoviev that he be authorized to return to party activities. The CC,
in response, decided to mount a campaign demanding the freeing of party leaders arrested in July and “the return to their posts of the prosecuted leaders of the working class—Lenin, Zinoviev, et al.”

Zinoviev made his first postindictment appearance at a meeting of the CC on the evening of August 31. He had already begun to contribute to the party press: On August 30 an unsigned article by Zinoviev, “What Not to Do,” appeared in Rabochii put'. Its thrust was to discourage the party in its preparations for an armed uprising, citing the example of the Paris Commune of 1871 as a warning.

Stalin, as senior editor, passed the article for publication without comment, an action that Trotsky regarded as characteristic of Stalin’s lack of full support for the party line. Lenin was quick to rebut Zinoviev’s caution in an article written on September 3. Trotsky comments,

Without mentioning Zinoviev, Lenin wrote on September 3, “The reference to the Commune is superficial and even foolish . . . the Commune could not at once offer to the people all that the Bolsheviks can offer them when they become the government: namely, land to the peasants, immediate peace prospects.”

The blow against Zinoviev rebounded at the editor of the newspaper. But Stalin kept silent. Anonymously, he was ready to support any Right Wing polemic against Lenin. But he was careful not to involve himself in it. At the first sign of danger he stepped aside.

The Ruckus with the Military Organization

Meanwhile, Stalin had stirred up a hornets’ nest with the Military Organization. At its meeting on August 13, the CC named Stalin to break the news to the MO that its newspaper, Soldat, was going to be taken over by the CC as the official party organ. This would not have been an easy assignment under the most favorable conditions, but Stalin, by his arrogant and overbearing behavior, managed to make it far worse.

The meeting with the MO took place on August 13. According to a formal complaint by the MO to the CC, filed on the fifteenth,

Comrade Stalin stated that there was no point in his holding talks with representatives of the Central Bureau of the MO; that, once a resolution had been adopted by the CC, it must be carried out without any discussion.

Smilga, said the MO, made a similar statement with regard to the funds belonging to Soldat. The MO characterized such behavior as “inadmissible”; such measures, it said,
are not accidental, but from the moment of the change from the former composition of the CC have developed into an outright system of persecution and repression of an extremely strange character. . . . The Central Buro of the Military Organization demands from the CC the immediate normal regulation of the question as to the forms of the mutual relations of these two organizations, considering that the existing state of affairs hinders the work of the Central Buro of the Military Organization in accordance with the tasks assigned to it by the All-Russian Conference of Military Organizations. 27

Strong language, directed unmistakably at Stalin. It is not surprising that the MO declaration of August 15 remained buried in the archives during the period of Stalin's power; its preservation and publication is a stroke of luck for the historian, showing as it does how far the Stalin of 1917 had already taken on character traits commonly thought of as dating from a much later point in his career.

The MO's blistering declaration was taken up by the uskii sostav on August 16. 28 It flatly rejected the MO's demand for autonomy but pointedly refrained from endorsing Stalin's high-handed actions; instead, it showed a desire to mollify the MO. "The publication of a newspaper for the soldiers," said the CC,

is recognized as desirable. Such a newspaper is Soldat. The CC entrusts the publication of this newspaper to the existing editorial board and delegates to it a member of the CC with the right of veto. Naming the editorial board is a prerogative of the CC. The Military Buro can propose the makeup of the editorial board to the CC. For talks with the Military Buro and the establishment of correct relations between them and the CC the CC designates Sverdlov and Dzerzhinsky. They are also directed to provide temporary supervision of the editorship of Soldat.

Stalin's behavior in this incident shows how far he had already moved in his self-identification with the unchallengeable authority of the party. In August 1917, however, his claim to power could still be challenged and curbed. The CC, by its handling of the case, delivered an implied reproof to Stalin for his failure to carry out the task to which he had been assigned, the takeover of Soldat. The MO's protest echoed the reference to Stalin's undesirable "personal characteristics" of March (see p. 11).

For Stalin's current status in the party, the most significant aspect of the matter was the CC's decision to send Sverdlov and Dzerzhinsky to probe the situation. This was not the first time Sverdlov had been called on to clean up one of Stalin's messes; in 1913 he had been sent by Lenin to rectify the situation in Pravda's editorial office resulting from policies initiated by Stalin of which Lenin disapproved.
AUGUST

The August episode served to refresh Sverdlov's impression of Stalin's weaknesses and faults of character. When Sverdlov helped to choose the team for the seizure of power in October, this shadow over Stalin may well have been a significant factor.

The Kornilov Mutiny

By the end of the Sixth Congress, Stalin had assimilated the broad outlines of Lenin's concept of current power relationships. In the events of August Stalin found evidence to confirm his and Lenin's view that a right-wing military dictatorship had been or was in the process of being established. It was in this context that Stalin viewed the Moscow State Conference, which opened on August 12 with some twenty-five hundred participants. In an article published on August 15 Stalin asserted,

There is no reason for doubt. Matters are moving toward the establishment and legalization of a military dictatorship.

It was under the influence of this concept that Stalin viewed the conflict that broke out toward the end of August between Kerensky, acting head of the government, and General Lavr Kornilov, commander in chief of the army. In an unsigned editorial published on August 28, Stalin minimized the significance of the conflict:

The fight now going on between the coalition government and the Kornilov party is a contest not between revolution and counter-revolution but between two different methods of counter-revolutionary policy.

Stalin continued to advance that explanation in his journalistic writings of late August and early September. Lacking in Stalin's analysis was any recognition of the leading role the party might play in using the conflict for its own purposes.

Lenin's reaction was significantly different. In the rapidly deepening gulf between Kerensky and the army high command Lenin saw the opening of a dazzling prospect for the Bolshevik party. On August 18 and 19 he wrote,

Our task now would be to take power and to proclaim ourself the government in the name of peace, land for the peasants, and the convocation of the Constituent Assembly. . . .

. . . Should a spontaneous movement break out in Moscow today, the slogan would be precisely to seize power.

When Lenin learned, on August 30, of the open conflict between
Kerensky and Kornilov, he was jubilant. In a confidential message to the CC he wrote,

The Kornilov revolt is a most unexpected (unexpected at such a moment and in such a form) and downright unbelievably sharp turn in events. . . . Like every sharp turn it calls for a revision and change of tactics. And, as with every revision, we must become extra cautious not to become unprincipled.

What Lenin had in mind was a sharp distinction between supporting Kerensky and fighting Kornilov. "We shall fight," Lenin wrote;

we are fighting Kornilov, just as Kerensky's troops do, but we must not support Kerensky. On the contrary, we expose his weakness. That is the difference. It is rather a subtle difference, but it is highly essential and must not be forgotten.32

This strategy, Lenin believed, could lead the party to power. But caution and secrecy were imperative:

we must speak of this as little as possible in our propaganda (remembering that even tomorrow events may put power into our hands, and then we shall not relinquish it).33

The key, Lenin argued, was action by the masses, galvanized into action by Bolshevik propaganda and agitation:

Now is the time for action; the war against Kerensky must be conducted in a revolutionary way, by drawing the masses in, by arousing them, by inflaming them.34

Not for a moment did Lenin forget the war:

In the war against the Germans, action is required right now; immediate and unconditional peace must be offered on precise terms. If this is done, either a speedy peace can be attained, or the war can be turned into a revolutionary war.35

Lenin's letter to the Central Committee was not intended for publication and therefore presented no problem to Stalin in his capacity as senior editor of the party organ. Nonetheless, the letter did create an awkward situation for Stalin in its emphasis on the imperative need for stirring up the masses against the Kerensky regime, a need that could only be met by party leaders with oratorical skills that Stalin lacked—but that Trotsky, more than anyone else, possessed in full measure.

From the moment when Lenin's letter of August 30 was received and read by the Central Committee, a new phase of the revolution
opened, one in which Stalin’s innate caution, his dislike for sudden shifts in policy, even his smoldering distrust of Lenin’s guidance, all contributed to place him at a disadvantage.

Stalin’s disadvantage was compounded by the reemergence of Lenin’s senior lieutenants, Kamenev and Zinoviev, into active political life and by the meteoric rise of Trotsky. Meanwhile, ignored by Stalin and seemingly relegated to a merely administrative role was the real master of the party machine, Sverdlov, who worked tirelessly at the task of marshaling the party’s human resources on behalf of the policies laid down by Lenin. Without realizing it, Stalin was being outflanked and outmaneuvered.