

## The Roles of Lenin and Stalin in the Russian Revolution

How should we interpret the Bolshevik Revolution, in the light of later events? Michael Lynch explains the issues with which we have to grapple and gives tips on how to impress the examiners.



Falsified detail of a photo from the VIII Congress of the Russian Communist Party, March 1919. L-R: Stalin, Lenin, and Mikhail Kalinin. Did Stalin fulfil or betray the revolution that Lenin had begun in 1917? Was he the heir or the betrayer of Lenin? These are not simply academic questions specially thought up by fiendish examiners to terrorise candidates. They relate to a genuine historical debate that continues to cause controversy among politicians and to divide historians.

### Importance of the Theme

Probably more books have been written about the Russian Revolution than any other event in the twentieth century. The reason is not hard to find. Despite the collapse of Soviet Communism in the early 1990s, there are Marxists who still believe that the Russian revolution was a unique event in human history. According to this belief, the taking of power by the Bolsheviks in October 1917 marked a momentous stage in the development of human society. The Bolshevik Party represented the proletarian masses whose historical role was to sweep aside their class oppressors. 1917 therefore, was a new dawn in human history. The workers of Russia had taken power for themselves. They had begun a revolution which would rapidly spread worldwide until it had destroyed capitalist governments everywhere and initiated the rule of the workers.

We know, of course, it did not happen that way. There was no international revolution. Capitalism was not destroyed and the few communist systems that were created proved incapable of dealing with the economic problems that confronted them. By the end of the twentieth century the only Communist states that still survived had either, as with the People's Republic of China, largely abandoned Marxism as a practical programme or, as with North Korea, become a byword for economic failure and political repression.

Yet those who still believe in the scientific validity of Communism would argue that its failures are more apparent than real. This is where the debate about the role of Lenin and Stalin becomes especially relevant. There is a school of thought that continues to argue that Lenin had set the Soviet Union on the right path. He had led the Russian workers to power in 1917 and during the next seven years created a workers' state which, having overcome its internal and foreign enemies in the Civil war of 1918-20, was in a position to lead an international

proletarian revolution. What went wrong was not Leninism but Stalinism. After 1929, Stalin, more concerned with strengthening his own personal power than with furthering Communist revolution, destroyed Lenin's achievements and plunged the Soviet Union into misery and oppression from which it never recovered.

### **Ways of Approaching the Issue**

What you have to ask yourself; therefore, is whether there was a real difference in character and aim between the policies introduced by Lenin between 1917 and 1924 and those which Stalin pursued from 1929 onwards. Clearly, you must first gather the evidence. Before you can hope to understand, let alone tackle, the issue you must familiarise yourself with a large slice of Russian history, the critical period between 1917 and 1940. You really do need to have a firm grasp of the main developments, otherwise your argument will be unconvincing. It would help to draw up a chronology of key events, as in the time-line below.

Once you are convinced that you are sufficiently familiar with the material you then need to begin making contrasts and comparisons between Lenin and Stalin in their exercise of power. The list on the opposite page gives an example of how you might assemble your ideas.

### **Possible Lines of Argument**

Is it reasonable to suggest that the severity of Lenin's methods was forced on him by the dire circumstances of civil war and foreign invasion whereas Stalin's brutality was a matter of personal whim? One line of analysis is to compare the two men in their personal ambitions. Although fanatically convinced of the correctness of his own political judgements, Lenin was remarkably free of personal vanity; for him power was a means to an end. For Stalin, however, it is arguable that power was the end. There are strong grounds for describing him as a paranoid megalomaniac. It is for you to say how much these personal characteristics of the two leaders mattered in their exercise of power. Is motive significant? Is it not the case that actions are all-important?

There is a further vital consideration. In the end both men held power in the name of revolutionary Communism. They were leaders of a political party that claimed to possess absolute truth. You should call on your understanding of the Bolshevik Party as it had developed since 1903 under Lenin. He made it a hard-line, uncompromising Marxist party. The conviction of the Bolsheviks that they alone understood the nature of politics made them wholly intolerant of all opposed views and parties. Many commentators have emphasised that the authoritarianism of the Russian Communist Party was not an historical accident. It was an essential part of its character. That is why it could never adopt genuinely democratic methods. Here it might be worth stressing that this absolutism, which reached its most extreme form under Stalin, had begun under Lenin. The Bolshevik Party bore Lenin's indelible stamp. In everything political, Lenin was an absolutist. Stalin inherited and continued that tradition.

It has to be said that there is scant evidence to support the idea that Lenin would have allowed the USSR to develop as a free society once the huge difficulties that first faced the Bolsheviks had been overcome. But where does the New Economic Policy fit into this? Was that not a liberalising policy? Here you should stress the context. Lenin introduced NEP not from principle but from necessity. Soviet Russia was starving. Had the existing shortages continued there simply would have been no Russian state, Communist or otherwise. Moreover, Lenin described NEP as being only a temporary measure, adopted to meet an emergency. Especially notable was his insistence at the time of the NEP's introduction that economic concession should be accompanied not by a lessening but by a tightening of the Bolsheviks' political control.

Another valuable point is that historians now lay great stress on the 'Russianness' of the Revolution. Looked at in the continuum of Russian history, the Revolution of 1917 and Stalin's subsequent development of it are part of the authoritarian tradition. Russia had made no significant moves towards democracy or representative government. Lenin and the Bolsheviks might despise Russian history. Nonetheless they were products of it. What they added was an intensity of conviction. Lenin and Stalin were in the tradition of the absolutist Tsars.

### **Wooing the Examiners**

A technique that will impress examiners is for you to air your up-to-date knowledge of the documents that have

become available to historians since the archives were opened following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. These papers tend to undermine the notion of an avuncular Lenin distressed by the harsh methods he was obliged to employ in creating the new Russia. The sources confirm that he was ruthless and unmoved by the social consequences of war communism. He and Trotsky were wholly determined, as Kronstadt showed, to use whatever means necessary to maintain the Bolshevik hold on power.

Your task is to weigh the evidence. Remember, balance is not a matter of always taking a middle position. If the evidence draws you to a particular conclusion, do not worry that you might be taking sides unfairly. Good historians are always ruled in their judgements by the available evidence.

### **Timeline - Major Events**

- **1917:** Lenin's Bolsheviks seize power in the October Revolution
- **1918:** The Bolsheviks disperse the democratically elected Constituent Assembly
- **1918-20:** The Civil War, Reds v Whites – the Bolsheviks operate a repressive political and economic policy of 'War Communism' – the 'Red Terror' includes the suppression of all non-Bolshevik parties, the disbanding of the trade unions and the forcible requisitioning of grain from the peasants.
- **1921:** The Kronstadt Rising is crushed by Trotsky's Red Army; Lenin introduces NEP, but accompanies it with the decree against factionalism.
- **1924:** Lenin dies – his 'Testament' leaves no clear instructions as to who is to follow him, but is very critical of Stalin.
- **1924-9:** Period of the power struggle – Stalin defeats both the Left and Right Bolsheviks and outmanoeuvres his chief rival, Trotsky.
- **1928-40:** The collectivisation of the peasants.
- **1928-55:** The Five-Year Plans, a state-directed attempt to modernise the Soviet economy by a policy of enforced industrialisation.
- **1934:** Beginning of the Purges against dissidents.
- **1936-39:** The Great Purge, a series of show trials removes leading members of the CPSU and decimates the red army.
- **1941-45:** Stalin's authority intensifies during wartime.
- **1945-53:** Continuation of the purges until Stalin's death.

### **Key Considerations**

*How did Lenin consolidate Bolshevik power in the period 1917-24?*

- by dissolving the elected Constituent Assembly
- by a rigidly-applied policy of 'war communism' in order to crush the Whites
- by creating one-party rule
- by using the military to suppress civil protests (e.g. Kronstadt 1921)
- by using the Cheka as an instrument of the Red Terror
- by destroying the trade unions as an independent force
- by prohibiting 'factionalism' (the right to criticise) within the Bolshevik Party
- by introducing 'show trials'
- by the forcible requisitioning of grain from the peasants
- by terrorising the Kulaks
- by setting up a system of prison camps (the forerunner of the 'Gulag')

*How did Stalin enforce his authority on the USSR?*

- by insisting on the absolute supremacy of the Communist Party
- by an enforced policy of collectivisation of the peasantry
- by a campaign to destroy the Kulaks
- by imposing a policy of industrialisation on the USSR
- by continuing to use the secret police (OGPU and the NKVD as developments of the Cheka) to create a new reign of terror
- by the development of a vast network of penal colonies (the 'Gulag')
- by destroying opponents, real or imagined in the Purges
- by a policy of 'communism in one country' always placing the interests of the USSR before those of international revolution

Do all these support or challenge the notion that Stalin's policies were the same as Lenin's in all major respects?

**Further Reading:**

- Edward Acton *Russia* (1986)
- Geoffrey Hosking *A History of the Soviet Union* (1992)
- Walter Lacqueur *Stalin: The Glasnost Revelations* (1990)
- Richard Pipes (ed) *The Unknown Lenin: From the Soviet Archives* (1996)
- Robert Service *Three Whys of the Russian Revolution* (1998)
- Robert Service *Lenin: A Political Life* (3 vols, 1985-92)
- Robert Service *The Russian Revolution 1917-32* (1986)
- Ian Thatcher (ed) *Regime and Society in Twentieth Century Russia* (1999)
- Leon Trotsky *The History of the Russian Revolution* (1932)
- Dmitri Volkogonov *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire: From Lenin to Gorbachev* (1997)

Michael Lynch has taught history at Leicester University. Among his publications are: *Reaction and Revolutions: Russia 1881-1924* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1992) *Stalin and Khrushchev: The USSR, 1924-64* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), and *Trotsky the Permanent Revolutionary* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1995).