

Historical Personalities of the Twentieth Century

Leon TROTSKY

David Van Tol



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LEON TROTSKY

DAVID VAN TOL



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Leon Trotsky
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David Van Tol

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INTRODUCTION

A note on Russian dates

A number of landmark Russian events are named after the month in which they occurred. Until 1918 Russians used the Julian calendar, which was thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar used throughout the world today. Events such as the February Revolution and the October Revolution of 1917 were originally named while the Julian calendar was in use in Russia.

Some historians have since readjusted the dates of these events to fit the Gregorian calendar, so that the October Revolution, for example, which began on 26 October 1917 (Julian calendar), is now referred to as the November Revolution (Gregorian calendar) by some.

This book uses the dates before 1918 that were recorded in the original primary sources, rather than the amended dates. Many Russians, including Trotsky himself, continued to refer to the October Revolution even after the Bolsheviks changed the Russian calendar. Events after 1918 are of course dated by the same calendar we use today.

The life of Leon Trotsky paralleled many of the events that shaped the twentieth century. His rise from village obscurity to become one of the most powerful men in the Soviet Union illustrates the growing influence of ordinary people from the beginning of last century. The major achievement of Trotsky's career, a key role in the Russian revolution of October 1917, had repercussions that were felt in virtually every country of the globe.

Trotsky's rise to prominence was interrupted by years in prison during which he became a devoted Marxist. In 1902, his introduction to Lenin, the future leader of the Bolsheviks, was a pivotal moment in the history of the Russian Revolution. Although a simmering feud divided the two revolutionaries for more than a decade, Lenin recognised the importance a talent such as Trotsky could one day bring to his party.

Trotsky's leadership of the St Petersburg Soviet in 1905 challenged the Tsarist autocracy to its very core. He distinguished himself as a master orator and activist and was arrested for his role in coordinating workers' protests and strikes. His time in prison was used to formulate the theory of permanent revolution, which proposed that revolution was an ongoing international process rather than a single national

phenomenon. A revolution in Russia could therefore survive in a world about to enter a revolutionary age – a belief that formed the basis of many decisions throughout his career. After being sentenced to exile in Siberia in 1906, Trotsky managed to escape to Western Europe, where his interaction with Europe’s socialist elite over the next decade, helped shape his internationalism.

Trotsky was an astute commentator on world events and his critique of World War One was typical of the condemnation he frequently made of the rich and powerful. He saw the war as an imperialistic struggle in which Europe’s working classes were being slaughtered while capitalists profited. His role at the Zimmerwald Conference in 1915 helped build the socialist anti-war movement that would strongly influence the attitudes of ordinary soldiers towards the war. Desertion among Russian troops was a major factor in Tsar Nicholas II of Russia abdicating the throne in February 1917. Trotsky then returned to St Petersburg to begin the task of rallying the workers and soldiers for revolution.

After joining the Bolshevik party in July 1917, Trotsky played a leading role in orchestrating the successful Bolshevik insurrection in October. His chairmanship of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet was vital in helping the Bolsheviks seize power from the Provisional Government. As the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs in the new Bolshevik government, he was responsible for the first task in consolidating their power – withdrawing Russia from the war against Germany.

As opponents of the Bolsheviks gathered to remove them from power, a civil war began and Trotsky was appointed Commissar for War. He grew the Red Army from virtually nothing to a force of over five million men by the end of the Civil War in 1920. For his efforts in defending the revolution, he was awarded the Order of the Red Banner, a distinction that earned him the respect of Lenin as ‘one of the finest Bolsheviks’.

Trotsky could be brutal in pursuing his single-minded aim of defending the workers’ revolution. During the Civil War, he ordered the use of ‘blocking units’ to shoot his own soldiers retreating from the Red Army. He also ordered the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising in which approximately 1,000 Russian sailors were killed in a battle on the frozen Bay of Finland. These sailors had helped the revolution succeed but became disillusioned with the Bolsheviks once they were in power.

Despite rising to a position of prominence second only to Lenin in the Soviet Union, Trotsky was stripped of his authority after a bitter power struggle with Joseph Stalin. Although an intellectual giant, Trotsky was a political novice whose errors of judgment allowed Stalin to become leader of the Communist Party after Lenin’s death. Stalin



was a master politician who used his authority as General Secretary to allow an influx of new party members, all of whom owed their positions to Comrade Stalin.

Trotsky spent more than half his life either in prison or in exile. His longest spell in exile began in 1929 when he was banished from the Soviet Union by Stalin. He was forced to live on the Turkish island of Prinkipo before moving to France in 1933, then Norway and finally Mexico in 1937. He spent the last ten years of his life criticising the Stalinist regime for its betrayal of Lenin's vision.

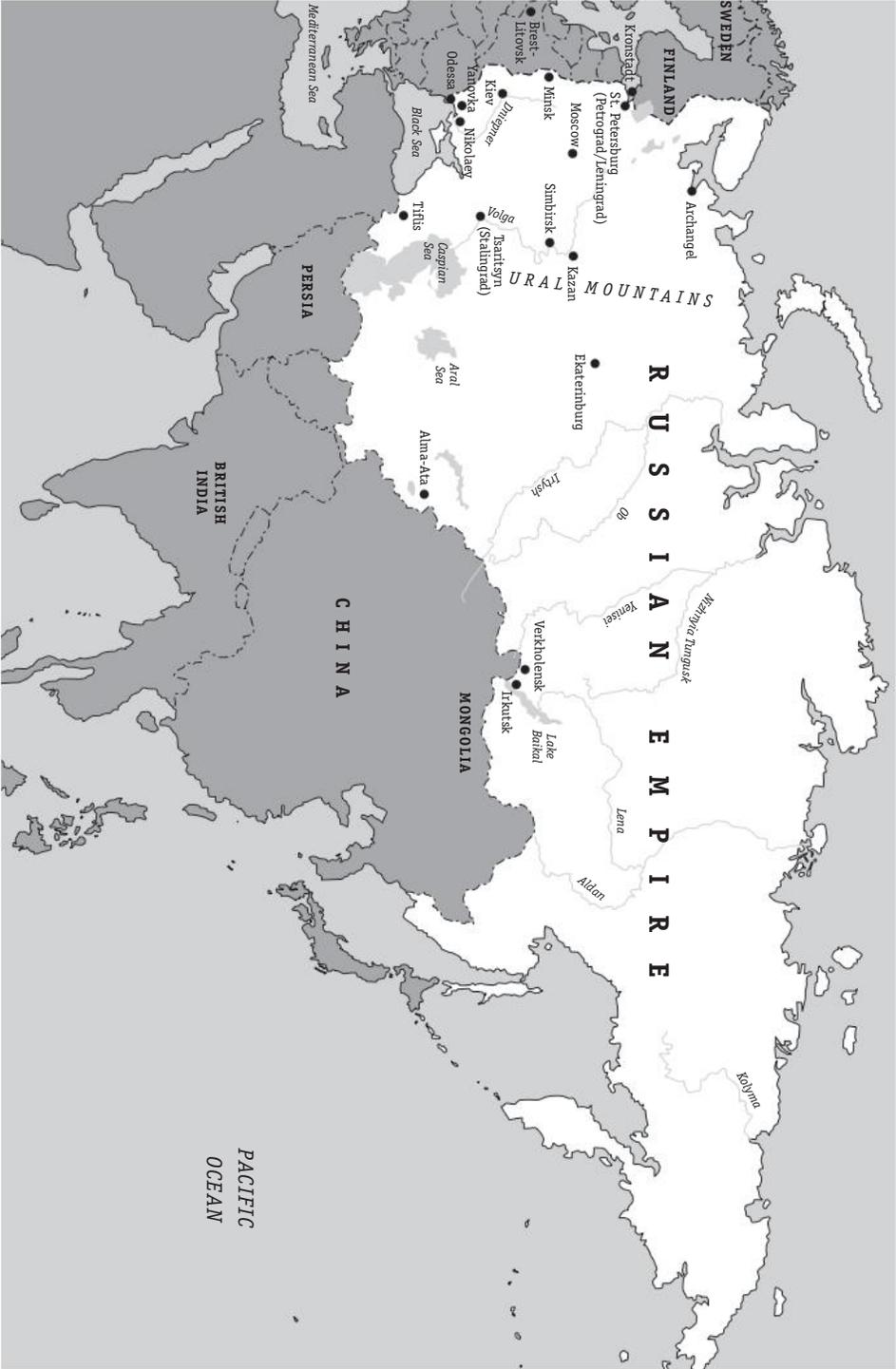
Trotsky's reputation inside the Soviet Union was thoroughly discredited during the infamous Moscow show trials of the late 1930's. Stalin's paranoia led to the public trial and execution of all potential rivals, most of whom had remained silent as Stalin seized the leadership of the Communist Party. During the Moscow show trials, confessions were extracted from every defendant who admitted to some involvement in a Trotskyist plot to kill Stalin. Practically every problem in Soviet society during the late 1930's was blamed on Trotsky and his spies. However no rival was more damaging to Stalin than Trotsky himself. He spoke freely outside the Soviet Union and consequently most members of his family were eventually killed by Stalin's secret police, the GPU. After one unsuccessful attempt on Trotsky's own life by Stalin's agents, he was finally silenced on 20 August 1940. His assassin, Ramon Mercader, was a Spanish communist whose murder weapon was a mountaineer's ice pick.

Since his death, many Western radicals have cited the works of Leon Trotsky as evidence that true communism was never actually implemented and that an alternative vision to Stalin's Russia did exist. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there are still those today who identify themselves as Trotskyists. To his Western critics, however, Trotsky and Stalin were regarded as children of the same inherently evil parent – communism.

Trotsky was a career revolutionary whose life was dominated by the workers' revolution and its defence. He was a fervent idealist who dedicated his life to turning traditional society upside down. Everything was secondary to creating, and then defending, the world's first workers' state. When this dream turned into a nightmare during the Stalinist era, it was Trotsky who saw himself as the champion of the international workers.

Trotsky's idealism is best summed up in his own testament written on 27 February 1940, several months before his death, 'Life is beautiful. Let future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence and enjoy it to the full.'

(Trotsky, *L. Testament of Leon Trotsky*)



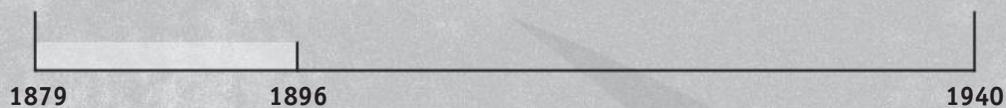
Map of the Russian Empire indicating significant places in Trotsky's life



CHAPTER 1:

FORMATIVE YEARS

(1879-1896)



Timeline

- 1879** Trotsky is born as Lev Davidovich Bronstein in Kherson, southern Ukraine.
- 1885** Trotsky attends a Jewish primary school for only a few months.
- 1888** Trotsky begins living with the Spentzer family in Odessa; enrolls in St Paul's High School.
- 1896** Trotsky moves to Nikolayev to complete his secondary schooling.

Family background

Leon Trotsky was born on 26 October 1879, exactly thirty-eight years to the day before he led the Bolshevik revolution. Born as Lev Davidovich Bronstein in the southern Ukrainian province of Kherson, Trotsky was the third child of David and Anna Bronstein.

In the year of Lev's birth the Bronsteins began a new life on the land at Yanovka, a farming property they had recently purchased. At the time farming was an unfamiliar livelihood for Russian Jews, most of whom were concentrated in towns and cities of the **Pale of Settlement**. This vast western region of the empire had been set aside by Catherine the Great in 1791 to restrict the movement of Russia's Jews. However, after the **annexation** of land from Poland by **Tsar** Alexander I, a small-scale movement of Jews beyond the Pale was ignored. It was sometime during the 1850's when Lev Bronstein's grandfather joined other Jewish pioneers to help colonise the frontiers north of the Pale.

David and Anna Bronstein had married for love, an exception to the customs of the day. Anna's parents initially disapproved of the union, criticising David for his coarse manner and warning their daughter of the tough peasant life ahead. His lack of education, typical of someone raised on the land, meant that he was simply not good enough in the eyes of Anna's parents. While David was illiterate and would remain so for most of his life, Anna's parents were proud of her education – a rare privilege for a Jewish girl in nineteenth century Russia. By all accounts, however, the marriage was a success despite the concerns of Anna's parents and the obvious differences between the two.

Their attitudes to religion in particular were very different. Having been raised in an orthodox Jewish family, Anna generally observed the basic requirements of her religion. David however, had little regard for religion and never learned **Yiddish**. To

earn every rouble possible, he ignored the **Sabbath**, choosing to work instead. The family were therefore far from devout and it is fair to say that from a very young age, Lev developed a secular outlook and had little if any time for matters of faith.

Childhood

Anna Bronstein gave birth to eight children in all, of which Lev was the fifth. Only four of her children survived infancy; the others died of either diphtheria or scarlet fever. Alexander, the eldest child, was Lev's senior by nine years. His sister Liza was four years older while Olga, his youngest sibling, was four years younger. It was with Olga that Lev formed the closest ties as they were regular playmates in the years before he went to school.

As parents, David and Anna Bronstein were generally too preoccupied with the work of the farm to devote any significant time to their children. In fact, the chief mechanic at Yanovka spent more time with Lev than anyone else. As a young child, Lev was active and curious and often escaped the family house to explore the various corners of Yanovka. He was particularly fond of the workshop where the mechanic happily indulged his inquisitive nature and taught him how to use his hands. During winter, however, family time was forced upon the Bronsteins, as the older children returned from school and freezing temperatures prevented outdoor work.

Despite a lack of emotional support, Lev grew up wanting for nothing physically. The Bronsteins worked tirelessly to achieve a relatively comfortable life in spite of the economic restrictions on Russian Jews. As the only mill owners in the district, they earned a modest income that enabled them to educate their children. They were, however, far from wealthy and lived in a simple mud house with two small bedrooms, a nursery and a dining room. During the rainy season the thatched roof would leak and the dirt floors turned to mud. Beyond the house were pastures for cows and horses but the main livestock were pigs, which roamed freely everywhere. Nearby barns stored the harvest and provided a good hiding place for the two youngest children who would bury themselves up to their elbows in the silos of wheat. In his first seven years, Lev barely left the confines of Yanovka.

As he grew up, Lev was exposed daily to the miserable existence of the peasants who came from the surrounding districts for work. David Bronstein was not an overly harsh employer by nineteenth century standards and on occasions even took pity on his poverty-stricken employees, helping them with extra food when he could. Yet his strict work ethic meant that everyone at Yanovka was driven hard, especially at harvest time. Lev frequently overheard the bitter complaints of the **peasants** against his parents and at times witnessed their desperate strikes for better food and pay.

At one point, many of the peasant labourers at Yanovka began to suffer from night blindness, a condition caused by severe malnutrition. However, when a government health inspector visited Yanovka, he reported that the peasants there were no worse off than those on other farms.

Education

There was little chance of Lev being accepted into a state school, due to Jewish enrolments being restricted to 10% or less of the total school population. Consequently, Lev was sent to a Jewish primary school or *heder* in the nearby township of Gromokla. This backwater town had been settled by German-Jewish immigrants who were pioneers of Russia's newly acquired territories, just as Lev's grandfather had been. At the age of seven, Lev left Yanovka for the first time to live with relatives while he attended school. His first experience of formal schooling was, however, one of frustration and disappointment as he understood very little of the lessons which were conducted in Yiddish. While he did learn to read Russian and acquired some basic maths skills, he saw little point in the hours spent translating the **Old Testament** from Hebrew into Yiddish. Overall, his academic performance was mediocre and socially, Lev felt isolated. Seeing that the boy was miserable, his parents decided to bring him back home after only a few months.

In the summer of 1886 one of Anna's relatives from Odessa, Moissei Filipovich Spentzer, came to stay with the Bronsteins, as his doctor had advised him to spend some time in the countryside to recover his health. A well-educated gentleman, Spentzer was typical of Anna's urbane, middle class family. Whilst at Yanovka, Spentzer spent his days tutoring Lev, whom he deemed to be an exceptionally bright and motivated boy. Accepting Spentzer's offer to educate the boy in Odessa, the Bronsteins farewelled Lev in the autumn of 1888.

At the age of nine, the move to the city marked a major crossroads in Lev's young life. His time in Odessa provided an intellectual awakening that would set him on a vastly different path from that of his parents. Odessa was a cosmopolitan city with a cultural diversity Lev had never experienced. A spectrum of new ideas challenged his narrow prejudices and broadened his horizons beyond the simple yet dull world of his upbringing. He became immersed in a variety of cultural interests and in time learned to read Italian and developed a love of literature, opera and art. In preparation for school, the Spentzers taught Lev to speak clear Russian instead of the crude dialect he had developed at Yanovka. More importantly they encouraged his love of learning.

As members of the aspiring middle class who were also Jews, the Spentzers were used to discrimination and were also strong critics of the Tsar. An undercurrent of **liberal**

ideas ran through the house and the conversation was never far from politics. Some years earlier, M.F Spentzer had been expelled from university for political offences but continued to disseminate liberal ideas and anti-Tsarist **propaganda**. With his own printing press, Spentzer's house was filled with manuscripts, newspapers and banned political tracts. An extensive library of both Russian and Western literary classics provided stimulation for a bright young mind beginning to question his place in the world. Lev began his love affair with the written word while living with the Spentzers.

In 1888 Lev entered St Paul's High School which had been founded by German Lutherans. Under the government policy of **Russification**, the school was forced to adopt Russian as its language of instruction despite its ethnically mixed student body. In practical terms, there was an atmosphere of openness and tolerance as no single religious group or nationality dominated and this provided the perfect environment for a young man searching for purpose and identity.

It soon became obvious that Lev was a gifted student. Although he had a particular aptitude for maths and science, he came first in all of his subjects. As a student, he was often argumentative and more than once was involved in leading a minor rebellion against a teacher. On one such occasion, Lev and other boys jeered their disliked teacher. Lev was identified as the ringleader of the group, probably due to his overconfidence, and was the only one expelled for a year. On another occasion he refused to write essays for a lazy teacher who neither read nor marked the work submitted. Whether or not these actions were the seeds of his revolutionary ideals, it does appear that from a young age, Lev questioned authority and never accepted the **status quo** for its own sake.

During school vacations when Lev returned to Yanovka, the realisation grew that his world was moving in an opposite direction from that of his parents. In his absence Yanovka had been transformed into a vast and highly productive rural estate and his father was now a significant landlord. In comparison to the Spentzer household, the world of Yanovka seemed narrow and unenlightened with its focus on physical labour and profit margin. By the age of sixteen, Lev had grown quite distant from his parents who, despite being proud of their son's academic achievements, failed to understand the direction in which he was now heading.

In 1896 Lev moved to the nearby city of Nikolayev to complete the last year of his secondary schooling. This was essential if he was to enter university and sit for a degree in pure mathematics. At this stage he hoped to pursue a career as a university academic. The year in Nikolayev would, however, prove to be a turning point in his life, as it was here that he was first introduced to the ideas of Karl Marx. By the following year, he would have abandoned his university degree for a career as a revolutionary.

GLOSSARY

Pale of Settlement: region to which Jews of the Russian empire were restricted during Tsarist times covering Poland, Belarus, the Ukraine, Lithuania and Moldova

annexation: to add an area to an empire, usually by conquest

Tsar: king or supreme ruler; the word tsar comes from the Latin word, Caesar

Yiddish: the common language spoken by Jews in Eastern and Central Europe

Sabbath: Saturday; observed as a day of rest and worship in the Jewish religion

peasants: rural workers

Old Testament: the collection of ancient holy books of Judaism; the first part of the Christian Bible

liberal: promoting individual rights and liberties, such as the freedom of speech

propaganda: opinionated information that attempts to change the political views of others

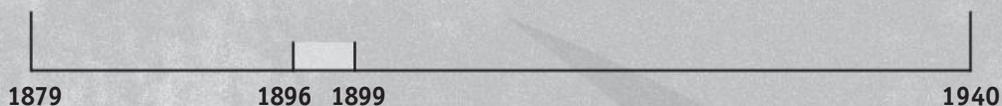
Russification: the government policy during Tsarist times to assimilate ethnic minorities within the Russian empire into the culture of the white European Russians

status quo: Latin for 'the current state of things'

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain why the Bronsteins' decision to move to Yanovka was so unusual.
2. Describe the nature of Lev's relationship with his parents.
3. Give examples of how Lev was exposed to the daily life of the local peasants.
4. Explain why Lev was sent to a *heder* instead of a state school for his primary education.
5. Briefly describe Lev's first experiences of school.
6. Compare and contrast the Spentzer family with the Bronsteins.
7. What kind of student was Lev? Describe his attitude while in secondary school.
8. Explain how Lev's early experiences might have contributed to the development of his revolutionary ideals.

CHAPTER 2:
POLITICAL
AWAKENING
(1896-1899)



Timeline

- 1881 Assassination of Tsar Alexander II
- 1896 Lev boards with socialists in Nikolayev; joins radical student discussion group.
- 1897 Lev helps form the Southern Russian Workers' Union.
- 1898 Lev is arrested along with other leaders of the Union; sent to prison in Kherson.
- 1899 Lev marries Alexandra Sokolovskaya whilst in prison in Moscow.
- 1900 Lev is sentenced to exile in Siberia.

Conversion to socialism

Lev Bronstein's introduction to radical politics occurred in 1896 whilst at secondary school in Nikolayev. Here he boarded with a family whose sons were probably the first **socialists** he had ever met. In their discussions Lev was confronted with issues such as the nature of Tsardom and the causes of social injustice. He initially dismissed his roommates' socialism as both extreme and impractical, preferring instead the **liberalism** he had learned from Spentzer. At the time, socialism was beginning to emerge as an alternative to liberalism, which had lost credibility in the face of Tsarist repression. While liberals called for the introduction of political rights guaranteed by a system of **parliamentary democracy**, radical socialists believed a **revolution** would inevitably sweep the ruling class from power and establish a new classless society. This would then lead to the redistribution of land and wealth to the peasants and workers.

Lev's first political ideas mirrored those of Moissei Spentzer who shunned all forms of **radicalism**. For liberals such as Spentzer, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 had been a major setback. Known as a liberal tsar, Alexander II had introduced many reforms and until his assassination it appeared that change in Russia would indeed come from above. Believing that his father's flirtation with reform had encouraged, rather than subdued opposition, the new Tsar Alexander III tightened his grip on autocracy. Before long, the son had **repealed** most of the liberal reforms of his father. Many liberals blamed radicals, such as those that assassinated Alexander II, for effectively undoing an era of reform. Other liberals were, however, radicalised by the **conservative** backlash that followed the assassination of Alexander II. Many educated

Russians turned to socialism and abandoned the belief that parliamentary democracy could one day be introduced. Disillusioned with the hope that social justice could come from above, many began to accept that revolution was the only way Russian society would be changed.

After weeks of heated debate with his roommates, Lev's intellectual commitment to liberalism faded. From the outset he agreed that Russia was in desperate need of change but as the students questioned and explained, Lev grew more and more pessimistic about the prospects of change occurring. The choice seemed clear. Either the Tsar would initiate reform of his own accord – something that was highly unlikely under Alexander III's strict rule – or the oppressed classes should seize power for themselves.

The orchard commune

Bronstein's conversion to socialism had been slow and gradual but his political consciousness thrived after he met Franz Shvigoovsky. A gardener of Czech origin, Shvigoovsky ran a political discussion group that attracted a regular following of radical students and workers. As well as hosting the group in his hut in the orchard of the university, Shvigoovsky also ran an underground library of banned books. Practically all members of the orchard commune were **Narodniks**, a populist movement that aimed to enlighten the peasantry in an effort to turn them against the Tsar. In fact, many Narodniks believed that by assassinating the Tsar, his mortality would be proven once and for all to the superstitious peasants. Narodnik tradition therefore advocated 'going to the people' in order to win them to the cause.

Upon joining Shvigoovsky's group, Bronstein was soon forced to take sides in a heated argument that had developed between the single **Marxist** in the group, Alexandra Sokolovskaya and the Narodnik majority. Sokolovskaya, a nursing student from Odessa, was at least six years older than Bronstein who soon took on the role of her leading antagonist. The issue at debate was the deterministic nature of Marxism, which claimed that human society is shaped by economic forces developed over a long period of time. The Marxist view of history therefore gives little significance to the actions and decisions of individuals. Narodniks on other hand, pointed to a rich and romantic tradition of heroes and **martyrs** who had rallied the people and shaped history by their bold deeds. Sokolovskaya's reasoned arguments contrasted sharply with Bronstein's arrogance and naivety. His reaction was to 'publicly destroy' Marxism in his first written article which, thankfully for the future Marxist revolutionary, was never published.

Southern Russian Workers' Union

Bronstein's involvement in working class politics had to this point been confined to heated discussions and avid reading. This changed in the spring of 1897 with the imprisonment of a student activist in St Petersburg's infamous Peter-Paul Fortress. Her subsequent suicide ignited an explosion of student protest on Russia's university campuses. The Tsar's secret police, the **Okrahna**, responded by detaining thousands of suspected student agitators. Although Bronstein no longer attended university having withdrawn the previous year, he was still a regular at Shvigovsky's hut, which was placed under close surveillance.

Bronstein, Shvigovsky and others had recently formed the Southern Russian Workers' Union. Before then the town of Nikolayev had no trade union despite its population of 10,000 dock and factory workers. To avoid detection, the Union, as it was known, was organised in small cells of about eight workers. At cell meetings, members read newspapers and underground political pamphlets, discussed their grievances and voted on courses of action. The Union also produced its own pamphlet, *Our Cause*, to which Bronstein was the main contributor. By the end of 1897, the Union had over 200 members made up of locksmiths, joiners, electricians, seamstresses and students.

'Grand tour' of Russian prisons

It didn't take long for the Okrahna to infiltrate the Union, its leaders totally ignorant of the Tsarist spies in their midst. Originally the authorities had dismissed Shvigovsky's group as a passionate but naïve band of youngsters incapable of organising a trade union. When it emerged, however, that the group formed the nucleus of the Union's leadership, Bronstein and the other leaders were placed under close surveillance before being arrested on 28 January, 1898.



Mugshots of Lev Bronstein taken in Nikolayev on his arrest in 1898. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

In his autobiography, Trotsky referred to the next two years of his life as his 'grand tour' of Russian prisons. While awaiting conviction, Bronstein was held in twenty different prisons, with six months being his longest stint in any single one. He spent the best part of three months in solitary confinement while in Kherson

prison. His prison cell was cramped and was without heating or ventilation during the depths of winter. Even though his treatment was not as bad as that suffered by other members of the Union, some of whom suicided or turned informer, Trotsky later admitted that 'there were times ...when I was sick with loneliness'. Prevented from washing for three months and with no change of clothes, his skin became infested with fleas. His diet included a small ration of bread that was to last for breakfast and lunch, as well as a portion of vegetable stew for dinner. Perhaps his greatest deprivation, however, was the absence of any books or writing materials.

Prison conditions improved after he was transferred from Kherson, where the prison authorities had failed to break his resistance. In other prisons he was given access to books and writing materials and spent much of his time discussing politics with other political prisoners. The Moscow prison was full of experienced revolutionaries who helped Bronstein apply his theoretical knowledge. The six months he spent in the Moscow prison set the course for the rest of his life, as it was here that according to Trotsky, his fellow prisoners made a Marxist of him. He was introduced to *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, a recently published book by a certain V.I. Lenin. This work had a major impact on Bronstein's thinking, as it was the first to seriously apply **classical Marxism** to Russia's unique economic situation. Along with banned political works, he also read the entire contents of the prison's official library. Over a six-month period, he read the Bible from cover to cover simultaneously in German, Italian, French and English. If this wasn't enough, the works of famous philosophers such as Voltaire, Kant and Darwin were also part of his daily diet of reading.

On one occasion, Bronstein organised a group protest in a show of support for another prisoner who had been punished with solitary confinement for failing to remove his cap in the presence of a warden. With Bronstein as their spokesman, the prisoners showed their defiance by remaining capped in the presence of the prison's governor. For this, the ringleader himself received a spell in solitary confinement.

Marriage

Towards the end of 1899 whilst in prison in Moscow, Bronstein and Alexandra Sokolovskaya married. Alexandra had joined the Southern Russian Workers' Union soon after its formation and was among those arrested for seditious activities. The couple were permitted a simple Jewish ceremony in which the bridegroom was forced to borrow a ring from a prison warden. The reasons for the marriage are not exactly clear. Trotsky later suggested that it was expedient for the couple to be married, since married couples could be deported together and this would help both survive the remoteness and loneliness of Siberia.

GLOSSARY

socialist: someone who believes the state should redistribute wealth from rich to poor

liberalism: the belief that government should protect and promote individual rights and liberties

parliamentary democracy: a system of government where decision-making is made by elected representatives who have a mandate to make laws in accordance with a constitution

revolution: a complete change in the system of government, usually by an illegal seizure of power

radicalism: the belief that drastic (often illegal) action is required to change society

repeal: to undo the law of a previous government

conservative: someone who is opposed to change or wants a return to the way things once were

Narodniks: an early Russian revolutionary movement that established rural communes to spread radical ideas among the peasantry; they aimed to turn Russia's vast majority of peasants against the Tsar.

Marxist: a follower of the political philosophy proposed by Karl Marx. Marx maintained that human society has always been characterised by class struggle. He proposed that a workers' revolution would one day destroy capitalism and replace it with a classless society.

martyr: someone whose death inspires others to their cause

Okrahna: the secret police of the Tsarist regime

classical Marxism: the original ideas put forward by Karl Marx, before others offered their different interpretations of what he meant

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe how Lev was first introduced to the ideas of socialism.
2. Outline Lev's first political views and how they were formed.
3. Give reasons why socialism became more popular in Russia after 1881.
4. Explain how Lev first became involved in political action.
5. Describe the conditions Lev had to endure whilst in prison in Kherson.
6. Explain how Lev's 'grand tour' of Russian prisons turned him into a committed Marxist.
7. Outline the reasons Trotsky gave many years later for his first marriage.

TROTSKY'S EARLY LIFE

(1879–1899)

SOURCE INVESTIGATIONS

Question 1

- (a) Outline TWO actions taken by the labourers in Source 1.
- (b) According to Source 1, how did Trotsky's father respond to the protesting labourers?
- (c) Describe TWO features of Source 2 that reveal what Trotsky's upbringing was like.

Question 2

Use Sources 1 and 3 as well as your own knowledge to describe Leon Trotsky's background.

Question 3

To what extent are Sources 3 and 4 useful for an historian studying Trotsky's education? In your answer refer to the reliability and perspective of each source.

SOURCE FILE

Source 1

The labourers left the fields and gathered in the courtyard. They lay in the shade of the barns with their faces turned downward, brandishing their bare, cracked, straw-picked feet in the air, and waited to see what would happen. Then my father would give them some whey, or watermelons, or half a sack of dried fish, and they would go back to work and even sing.

Trotsky, L. *My Life*, p.42

Source 2



Photograph of Lev Bronstein at age nine (1888). Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

Source 3

"There was one teacher there who never would give a mark of five (i.e. out of five). 'Only God gets five!' he used to say. But he gave Leon five – he simply had to. Another boy tried his best to get that mark, but the teacher told him again, 'I don't give fives.' 'You gave Bronstein five!' the boy said. 'That's Bronstein!' the teacher answered."

Mrs. M.F. Spentzer quoted in Eastman, M. *Leon Trotsky: The Portrait of a Youth*.

Source 4

He was extremely self-assured, self-assertive and somewhat condescending towards his schoolmates... He had many admirers and as many detractors, for talent is rarely forgiven, and in time, moreover, the sense that he was exceptional generated in him marked egoistic and egocentric traits. This was underlined by the fact that, even when he was popular, he had no close friends, for friendship demands equality. From childhood on, Trotsky was unwilling to recognize his intellectual equal in anyone, except possibly Lenin.

Volkogonov, D. *Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary*, p.5

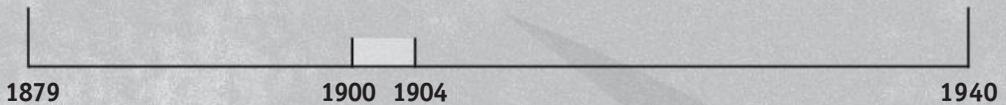
EXTENDED RESPONSE QUESTIONS

- (a) Describe the main influences in Lev Bronstein's early life.
- (b) Explain the factors that led to Lev Bronstein becoming a revolutionary.

CHAPTER 3:

LIFE AS AN ÉMIGRÉ

(1900-1904)



Timeline

- 1900** Lev and Alexandra Bronstein begin their Siberian exile.
- 1902** Lev assumes the name Leon Trotsky and escapes from Siberia.
October: Trotsky meets Lenin in London and joins the editorial board of *Iskra*.
- 1903** Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party sees the formation of Bolshevik and Mensheviks factions; Trotsky joins the Mensheviks.
- 1904** Trotsky writes *Our Political Tasks* strongly criticising Lenin and the Bolsheviks.
September: Trotsky resigns from the Mensheviks.

Siberian exile

Siberia's isolation and severe winters made it the ideal dumping ground for political enemies of the Tsar. By removing the major opponents of the regime from the nerve centres of political agitation, the revolution would hopefully be starved of life. Trotsky spent most of his first **exile** in the township of Verkholensk, which was much closer to the Mongolian desert than it was to any of Russia's major industrial cities. The squalid streets with open sewage, months of sub-zero temperatures, exposure to disease and regular famine, all made life in Verkholensk a daily struggle for the Bronsteins.

Nevertheless, an underground network connected political exiles in Siberia with Russian **émigrés** abroad. Instead of starving the revolution of its leaders, the punishment of exile created communities of dissidents that developed into 'universities of revolution'. Bronstein contributed to this underground activity by writing for a local newspaper, *The Eastern Review*, under the **pseudonym** Antid Oto (from antidote). He also produced political pamphlets for the fledgling Social Democratic Union of Siberia and soon became known to Russian émigrés abroad, in particular the editors of *Iskra* (*The Spark*) in London.

During the summer of 1902 a copy of Lenin's essay 'What is to be done?' arrived at Verkholensk. In his famous essay, Lenin called for a small and ideologically united party to act as the workers' **vanguard** in overthrowing **capitalism**. Without the guidance

of an educated revolutionary elite, Lenin argued that Russia's workers would merely 'eat the crumbs from the table, rather than enjoy the banquet itself'. On their own, Russia's workers were restricted to begging the capitalists for minor improvements in wages. Led by a revolutionary intelligentsia, however, they could bring an end to the existence of exploitation itself.

Bronstein saw Lenin as the architect of a future revolution. After four and a half years in exile, it was clear that the much-anticipated revolution would not emerge from Siberia. With the blessing of his wife, who by now was the mother of two small girls, Bronstein sought the first available opportunity to escape. With autumn drawing near and the possibility of snowfall blocking the roads, he made his move. To stall the police he placed a dummy in his bed, giving the impression that he was sick. Forced by necessity to use a false passport, Lev hastily chose the alias, Leon Trotsky, the name of a guard he had met while in prison in Odessa.

The London years

Trotsky's first port of call after his successful escape was *Iskra's* Russian office in Samara. Here he joined the writing staff of the paper, signing his articles as 'The Pen'. From Samara, he travelled to St Petersburg, then Kiev, Zurich, Vienna, and Paris. He finally arrived at Lenin's London address at dawn on an autumn morning in October 1902. Lenin's sleep was broken by his wife's announcement that 'the Pen has arrived', indicating something of the reputation he had already formed. Lenin greeted him and was eager to hear a first-hand account from a Siberian exile about the effectiveness of the underground network.

In the days ahead Lenin and Trotsky became better acquainted over long walks around London's historical landmarks. While Lenin was content to act as tour guide, Trotsky was eager to discuss the revolutionary movement. Lenin's wife arranged accommodation for him with two other members of the *Iskra* board, Julius Martov and Vera Zusalich with whom he formed a close bond during his London years.

As a regular writer for *Iskra*, Trotsky soon found himself drawn into the politics of the editorial board. His appointment to the board with a consultative vote drove a new wedge between the two factions that had developed. The major editorial issues were decided by a vote of the six board members, frequently resulting in an impasse between the three youngest editors and the three oldest. For some time, Lenin had complained that the brunt of the work had fallen to himself, Martov and Potresov, the younger board members. He accused Plekhanov, Zusalich and Axelrod, the older board

members, of resting on their reputations instead of contributing to the development of the paper. Trotsky's appointment to the board was therefore meant to break the editorial deadlock. Trotsky, however, was his own man and made his independence plain. Against expectations, he did not automatically side with the younger editors. He developed close relationships with both Zusalich and Axelrod who began acting as his political mentors. As Lenin's uncompromising stance continued to alienate members of both factions, Trotsky began to draw closer to Martov.

The Bolshevik-Menshevik split

Convened by the editorial board of *Iskra*, the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) first met in a flea-ridden Brussels warehouse in 1903, before reconvening in London to avoid police interest. Some of the key items on its agenda included: the requirements for party membership; organisation of the party; and the election of a **Central Committee**.

Despite successfully passing a few early resolutions, the Congress soon divided over the requirements of Party membership and how the Party ought to be organised. As he had advocated a year earlier in 'What is to be done?', Lenin called for a small and limited membership led by those with the strongest **ideological** credentials. They should be qualified thinkers able to guide the proletariat, who were largely incapable of the momentous tasks ahead. Lenin believed that members should be active participants in the life of the party, rather than merely sympathisers. Martov, who emerged as Lenin's leading opponent, called for a more inclusive membership drawn from a variety of opposition perspectives. Soon a majority of congress delegates had fallen in behind Martov, but when the members of the **Jewish Bund** (all of whom supported Martov) stormed out of the congress, Lenin's faction emerged as the **Bolsheviks** (majorityites) while Martov and his supporters were labelled the **Mensheviks** (minorityites)

As the delegate for the Siberian Union, Trotsky resisted attempts by Lenin to win his support for the Bolsheviks. Due to his close relationship with Martov, Trotsky reacted against what he saw as Lenin's brash and elitist behaviour. In the following months Trotsky would openly criticise Lenin for wanting to become the dictator of the Party, drawing parallels with the **Jacobins** who, during the French revolution, silenced all opposition by embarking on a reign of terror. The split at the Second Party Congress was deepened by Lenin's continued insistence that the older generation on the *Iskra* board be removed.

Attempting reconciliation

The rift between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks deepened when Martov and Trotsky, both Mensheviks, resigned from the board of *Iskra* and stopped writing for the paper. In September 1903 the Mensheviks met in Geneva to consider their next step. Their main dilemma was whether to reconcile with the Bolsheviks and thus save the RSDLP, or to form a new political party altogether. Despite opting to remain part of the RSDLP for the time being, the Mensheviks took the decisive step of forming an alternative Central Committee to be prepared in the event of a permanent split.

No Menshevik was more vehement in his criticism of Lenin and the Bolsheviks than Trotsky. In his 1904 article titled *Our Political Tasks*, Trotsky attributed the cause of the split to Lenin's dictatorial tendencies, going as far as calling him a 'rabble-rouser'. Years later, this article was the best weapon Trotsky's enemies had with which to attack him. He naturally took great pains to play it down once he became a Bolshevik in 1917, but not before the article, along with his Menshevik past, had become his Achilles' heel.

By the middle of 1904 events in the **Russo-Japanese war** had turned against Tsar Nicholas II. Many Mensheviks began to seriously consider a **coalition** with Russian liberals as a way of strengthening opposition forces against the Tsar. By 1905, most Mensheviks were openly advocating a strategy of slow and gradual political reform, something that placed them on common ground with the liberals. To a radical such as Trotsky, these tactics were nothing more than opportunism and a complete rejection of the principle of **proletarian revolution**.

As a result of his growing rift with the Mensheviks, Trotsky formally withdrew as a member of their faction in September 1904. He continued to criticise extremists in both factions but adopted the role of chief conciliator for the next 12 years, remaining unaligned to either camp.

GLOSSARY

exile: someone who has been banished from their usual country for a crime against the government

émigré: a member of a national group forced to live abroad

pseudonym: a false name under which an author writes

vanguard: those with the knowledge and ability to guide the uneducated masses in revolution

capitalism: an economic system where private ownership allows people to buy and sell for a profit

Central Committee: delegates elected at a Party Congress to form the leadership group of the Party

ideological: relating to or concerned with ideas

Jewish Bund: originally a faction of the RSDLP that wanted the party to support Jewish independence inside the Russian empire

Bolsheviks: Russian term translated as 'majorityites'; refers to followers of Lenin who called for party membership to be restricted to individuals prepared to carry out the work of the party

Mensheviks: Russian term translated as 'minorityites'; refers to followers of Martov who called for party membership to be open to a broad range of individuals who sympathised with the aims of the party

Jacobins: a radical group during the French revolution whose 'reign

of terror' used the guillotine to kill suspected opponents

Russo-Japanese war: the war between Russia and Japan over Port Arthur in Korea from 1904-1905

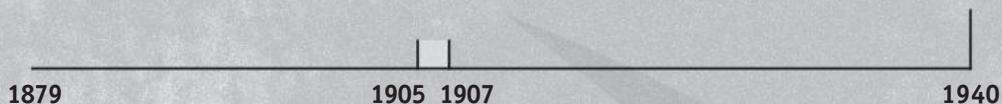
coalition: an alliance between political groups for their common interest

proletarian revolution: a seizure of power by representatives of the working class; conducted against the middle class or bourgeoisie who control the government

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Give reasons why the punishment of exile was largely ineffective for Russian revolutionaries.
2. Describe the new opportunities that were presented to Trotsky after he arrived in London.
3. Explain the internal political problems of the *Iskra* editorial board.
4. Give reasons why the RSDLP split into Bolshevik and Menshevik factions at the 1903 Congress.
5. Outline the criticisms Trotsky made of Lenin at the time of the split.
6. Explain why Trotsky eventually left the Mensheviks.

CHAPTER 4:
DRESS REHEARSAL
FOR REVOLUTION
(1905-1907)



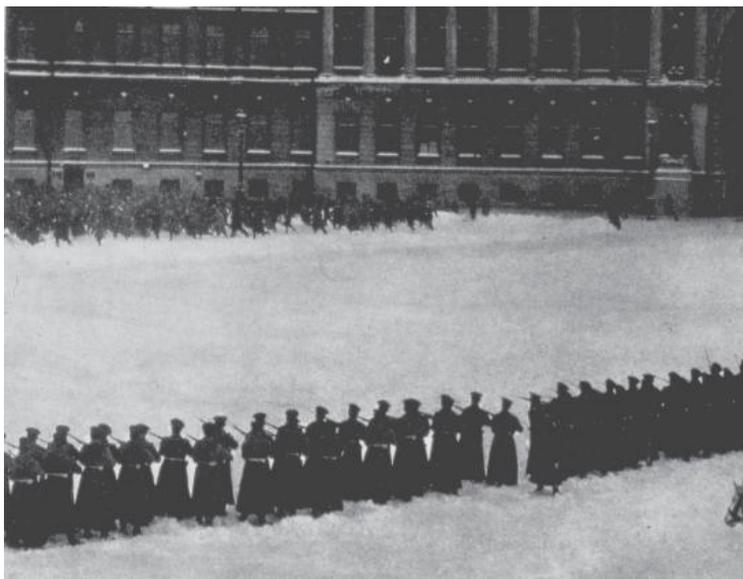
Timeline

- 1905** **January:** Bloody Sunday massacre; Trotsky is living in Geneva.
- February:** Trotsky returns to St Petersburg.
- May:** Trotsky is forced to flee St Petersburg after criticising the government.
- July:** St Petersburg Soviet is formed.
- October:** Trotsky returns to St Petersburg and is elected deputy chairman of the Soviet. Tsar Nicholas II issues the October Manifesto.
- November:** The government closes the St Petersburg Soviet and arrests its leaders.
- 1906** Trotsky writes *Results and Perspectives* which proposes the theory of permanent revolution.
- September:** Trial of the fifteen leaders of the St Petersburg Soviet; Trotsky sentenced to exile in Siberia.
- 1907** **January:** Trotsky escapes en route to Siberia; arrives in Finland where he meets Lenin.

Bloody Sunday

Months of simmering discontent among the workers and students of St Petersburg finally boiled over on January 9, 1905 when Father Gregory Gapon led a 150,000-strong procession to the Tsar's Winter Palace. Gapon had intended to present the Tsar with a petition of the workers' requests which included free and democratic elections, the institution of an eight-hour day, safer working conditions, wage increases and an end to the ill-fated Russo-Japanese war. The protesters were far from an angry revolutionary mob – most wore their Sunday clothes and carried religious banners and portraits of the Tsar. When the procession arrived at the Winter Palace, the Tsar's Cossack guards panicked and opened fire on the unarmed crowd. It was estimated that about 1,000 were killed either from the gunfire or in the resulting stampede. The events of Bloody Sunday sparked widespread strikes and rioting. By the end of the month Nicholas's government faced imminent collapse.

Trotsky was in Geneva when he first heard the news of the Bloody Sunday massacre. For a Marxist such as Trotsky, the 1905 uprising seemed to confirm his belief in the inevitability of revolution. Theory had finally become reality. Having debated, speculated and prophesied for the past decade, Trotsky was now eager to become a participant in the unfolding events. He was therefore among the first émigré revolutionaries to return to St Petersburg despite remaining a political fugitive.



Bloody Sunday – a re-enactment. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

Rallying the workers

Trotsky was soon at the head of strike committees, issuing declarations and giving impassioned speeches to the workers of St Petersburg. In a short time, his name became a familiar one in factories across the city. He saw that his major task was to convince the workers to use this opportunity to overthrow the capitalist system as well as the Tsar. He pointed out that the factories and the mills in which they worked were just as repressive and deadly as the Tsar's soldiers who were responsible for Bloody Sunday. 'Listen, **Comrades**. You are afraid of the Tsarist soldiers. But you are not afraid to go day in and day out to the factories and mills where the machines drain your blood and cripple your bodies.'

With the news of Russia's humiliating naval defeat by the Japanese in the Straits of Tsushima on 14 May 1905, Trotsky issued an open letter condemning the Tsar for the disaster. Deemed an act of treason by the government, Trotsky was forced to flee to nearby Finland where he remained for about four months.

By the time he returned to St Petersburg in early October, the city was experiencing a **general strike**, led by the newly formed St Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies. The **Soviet**, as it became known, was a council of about 500 representatives, elected by 200,000 workers from around the city. It had emerged almost spontaneously in the days after Bloody Sunday as an expression of grass-roots action over which

the government had no control. In the absence of voting rights, the workers of St Petersburg had formed their own decision-making body with the potential to bring the government to its knees. In terms of challenging the Tsar, this was a far cry from the humble petition carried by Father Gapon nine months earlier. According to Trotsky, ‘... the Soviet roused great masses of people. The workers supported it to a man.’ (Trotsky, L. *My Life*, p.138)

Chairman of the St Petersburg Soviet

Trotsky was soon elected Deputy Chairman of the St Petersburg Soviet. On most issues he managed to sideline the Soviet’s Chairman, Khrustalev-Nosar. It was therefore Trotsky who drafted most of the decrees issued in the fifty days of the Soviet’s existence. During the height of the October general strike Trotsky also launched a newspaper called *Nachalo* (*The Beginning*) with the aid of some Mensheviks. Within days it had become the most popular paper among the workers, easily outselling the Bolshevik produced *Novaya Zhizni* (*The New Life*). The remainder of his time was spent in a seemingly endless cycle of meetings of the Soviet’s Executive Committee, mostly geared towards coordinating the October general strike.



Trotsky circled and members of the St Petersburg Soviet, 1905. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

By the fifth day of the general strike the Tsarist government was badly shaken, forcing it to come to terms with the workers' new self-proclaimed power. In order to save his monarchy from collapse, Nicholas II issued a manifesto on 30 October 1905, in which he appeared to give up much of his **autocratic power**. The October Manifesto granted new constitutional rights such as freedom of conscience, speech and assembly and most importantly the promise of an elected **Duma** or parliament. These concessions instantly divided the Tsar's opposition. While the demands of the middle class had now been satisfied, nothing of substance in terms of improved working conditions had been given to Russia's workers. Indeed the October Manifesto was accompanied by a public order issued by Trepov, the **Minister of the Interior**, to 'spare no bullets' in the face of civil unrest. In contrast to the majority of Bolsheviks who saw the October Manifesto as a victory, Trotsky flatly rejected it, declaring before the St Petersburg Soviet.

Citizens, now that we have put our foot on the neck of the ruling clique, they promise us freedom...The Tsar's Manifesto is only a scrap of paper. Today it has been given to us and tomorrow it will be taken away and torn in pieces as I am now tearing it into pieces, this paper-liberty, before your very eyes. (Trotsky, L. 1905, p.76)

These were prophetic words, as within weeks, censorship of the press had been reintroduced. This had the greatest impact on the working class papers, which continued to express their grievances against the Tsar. When the Soviet refused to submit the newspapers to the government censor, its Chairman, Khrustalev-Nosar, was arrested and Trotsky took on the chairmanship. Under his direction the Soviet then instructed the workers to stop working after the eighth hour of each day. The final straw for the government came when the Soviet called on all Russian citizens to boycott the payment of taxes. This was to be the last decree of the St Petersburg Soviet before its entire leadership was arrested soon afterwards. As he was being escorted from the speaker's box by the police Trotsky cried out, 'See how the Tsar carries out his October Manifesto'.

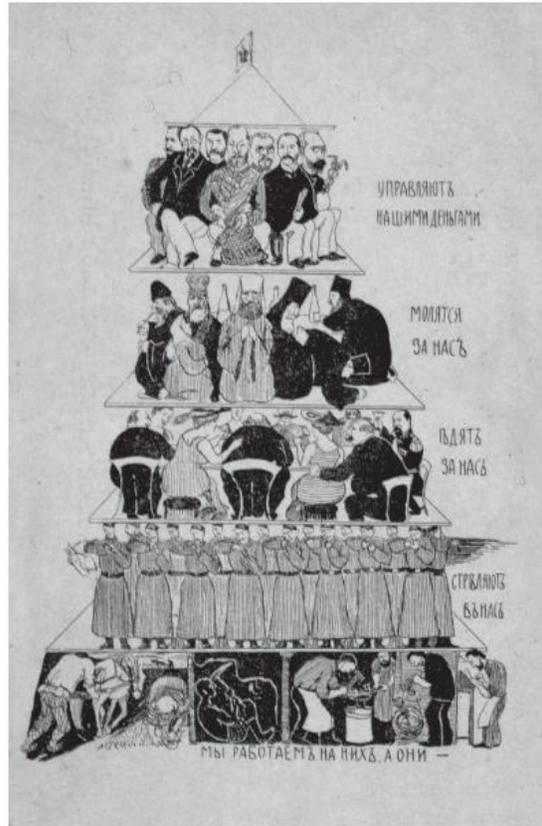
With its dispersal, it appeared as though the work of the St Petersburg Soviet, under Trotsky's direction, had come to nothing. For Trotsky however, 1905 was seen an important dress rehearsal for the drama that would unfold in 1917. Having been effectively mobilised, the **proletariat** were ready for insurrection. Without leadership to guide them however, it would take twelve years before they were once again in a position to seize power.

Formulating the theory of permanent revolution

Trotsky was to spend the next twelve months imprisoned in Peter-Paul Fortress, an imposing symbol of Tsarist repression. However, since the October Manifesto, a surprising degree of leniency had been shown to political prisoners who now had privileges unheard of even twelve months earlier. Trotsky's cell soon resembled a library in which he spent most of his time reading and writing till late at night. Many of his articles and proclamations were secretly passed on to his partner Natalya Sedova on her many visits. It was at this time that Trotsky also produced arguably his most significant contribution to Marxist thought. In his article 'Results and Perspectives', Trotsky put forward the theory of **permanent revolution** that

would eventually become synonymous with his name and form the theoretical basis of many of his future political decisions. In essence, permanent revolution saw each revolution as a small part of an ongoing international process rather than an isolated, single national event.

In the aftermath of the 1905 revolution, Russia's revolutionary elite was left with more questions than answers. Most found it difficult to explain the recent events in Russia according to Marx's theory of revolution, which had been based on the political developments in Germany several decades earlier. In predicting where and when the next European revolution would occur, most Marxists tended to ignore Russia, focusing instead on the more highly industrialised nations of Europe such as



The Pyramid of Capitalism. From top to bottom the captions translate to: 'We rule over you', 'We pray for you', 'We eat for you', 'We shoot you', 'We work for you'. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

Germany and Britain. These societies had a large proletariat with great revolutionary potential, unlike the Russian workers who were poorly organised, small in number and had become submissive in the face of repression. Trotsky devoted most of his attention to these issues whilst in prison. As a committed revolutionary, he wanted to understand Russia's role in an international context.

In order to understand Trotsky's concept of permanent revolution, it is necessary to consider firstly the Marxist view of history. According to Marx every human society, past and present, is characterised by **class conflict**. European society had evolved through a series of stages, each with its own class conflict and each ending in a revolution from which a new ruling class and a new exploited class emerged. Thus in Germany, capitalism had risen from the ashes of **feudalism** as the result of a **bourgeois revolution** in the nineteenth century. As such, Germany was presently in its capitalist phase of development where the producers of capital were engaged in a class struggle with the owners of capital, the **bourgeoisie**. From the vantage point of the nineteenth century in which he wrote, it appeared to Marx that industrialised countries such as Germany were ready for the next stage of development and were therefore ripe for a **proletarian revolution**. This was because the working masses of Germany had reached a size where they were capable of overthrowing the much smaller capitalist ruling class.

Historically, Russia was a different case altogether and one that many Marxists had difficulty with. Was Russia in fact ready for a proletarian revolution given its small industrial working class? Was it possible for a highly equipped political party to lead a proletarian revolution *on behalf* of the workers? Was it necessary for capitalism to fully develop before true socialism could be achieved? Or should the workers instead throw their support behind middle class liberals in their attempts to end Tsarism? For the Mensheviks, a revolution came to maturity only after a slow but inevitable process in which certain economic conditions had to be in place. They opposed the view that evolving historical processes could be accelerated by the efforts of a single political party. According to the Mensheviks, a workers' revolution was years away. They therefore saw the events of 1905 as a bourgeois revolution, directed by the middle classes against the Tsar and urged the workers to support middle class liberals in their efforts to overthrow a common enemy.

This marked yet another departure in thought between Trotsky and the Mensheviks, since Trotsky maintained that it was the workers who had seized the initiative in forcing the Tsar to make concessions. To help fit Russia's unique situation into classical Marxist theory, Trotsky developed the theory of permanent revolution, which essentially viewed separate revolutions as part of a larger process. For example, history

had shown that revolutions do not stop at national borders and in fact, a revolution in one country could often cause a revolution in another. Similarly a bourgeois revolution, once set in motion, could easily turn into a proletarian revolution. According to Trotsky, this had in fact occurred in Russia in 1905. For Trotsky, the achievements of the St Petersburg Soviet provided evidence that the 1905 revolution was proletarian in nature, despite the fact that it ended in frustration for the workers and met the demands of the middle class.



Trotsky inside his prison cell, 1906. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

Trial and escape

Trotsky saw his impending trial as an opportunity to win public support by highlighting the repressive nature of Nicholas's regime. He was firm in the conviction that the Tsar's victory would only be temporary. While in gaol, he remained convinced that 1905 marked the beginning rather than the end of the Russian Revolution.

The trial of the Soviet's leadership began on September 19, 1906 with Trotsky's parents in attendance. To quell potential civil unrest caused by the large gathering of workers at the trial, the government deployed all of St Petersburg's police force to the court building. The Tsarist regime, which had been shaken by the popularity of the St Petersburg Soviet, saw Trotsky as a dangerous enemy who had to be denied a voice. The fifteen leaders of the Soviet therefore stood accused of having encouraged an armed

insurrection against the government. This was a charge Trotsky was careful to deny as a guilty verdict attracted a sentence of hard labour. Despite eventually being found not guilty of this charge, the fifteen leaders of the St Petersburg Soviet were sentenced to indefinite exile in Siberia but without hard labour.

The government was so concerned about the security of these popular prisoners that it brought soldiers from Moscow to form an escort, distrusting the St Petersburg garrison who they feared supported the Soviet. To avoid escape, the precise destination of the prisoners and their date of departure remained unknown until the morning of 5 January 1907. The long and arduous journey to the Siberian township of Obdorskoe was to take up to several months, depending on weather conditions. Over fifty guards would accompany the fifteen prisoners.

Towards the end of the journey, at the town of Berezov, Trotsky staged a daring escape. Faking an attack of sciatica, he remained in Berezov with two guards while the rest of the party set off on the final leg of its journey. After making his break with the help of a local peasant, Trotsky covered over 500 miles, at times using dogs and a sleigh until he arrived in the Urals. He was then able to board a train and arrived back in St Petersburg just eleven days after having made his escape. With his wife and baby son, Trotsky quickly slipped into nearby Finland, where he made contact with Lenin and Martov, the leaders of the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions. This was during a brief period after the Social Democrats' Stockholm Conference when the two factions had put aside their differences in a half-hearted effort to unite.

GLOSSARY

comrade: a title of equality between citizens

general strike: work stoppages across a number of industries at the same time

soviet: Russian for council; made up of representatives elected by workers or soldiers

autocratic power: unrestricted power in the hands of one individual

duma: Russian for elected assembly or parliament

Minister of the Interior: member of the cabinet responsible for civil order and internal security

proletariat: the urban working masses

permanent revolution: the theory that revolution is an ongoing international process rather than a single national event

class conflict: enmity between different economic groups within society, for example between employers and workers

feudalism: the system during the middle ages where the monarch divided his land among the nobility, who allowed it to be used by peasants in exchange for certain dues

bourgeois revolution: a seizure of power by representatives of the wealthy middle class; conducted

against the monarch and his nobility, who control the apparatus of government

bourgeoisie: otherwise known as the middle class; those who have created wealth as opposed to inheriting it

proletarian revolution: a seizure of power by representatives of the working class; conducted against the middle class or bourgeoisie who control the apparatus of government

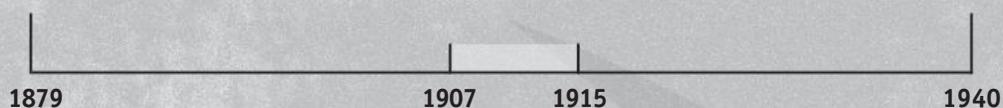
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain why Bloody Sunday and its aftermath was significant for Trotsky.
2. Give reasons why Trotsky was forced to flee to Finland in 1905.
3. Explain how the St Petersburg Soviet came into being.
4. Describe Trotsky's role in the newly created Soviet.
5. Explain why Trotsky rejected the October Manifesto.
6. What motivated Trotsky to formulate his theory of 'permanent revolution'?
7. Explain why Trotsky's trial in St Petersburg received so much attention from the government.

CHAPTER 5:

EUROPEAN SOUJOURN

(1907-1915)



Timeline

- 1907** London Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party
- 1908** Trotsky becomes editor of *Pravda* in Vienna.
- 1912** **August:** Vienna Conference attempts to reconcile the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks; Trotsky forms the August bloc calling for reconciliation.
September: Trotsky joins *Kiev Thought* as a correspondent on the Balkan Wars.
- 1914** **June:** Start of World War One; Trotsky is living in Vienna.
August: Trotsky moves to Switzerland.
November: Trotsky writes *War and the International*, criticising socialists who support the war.
- 1915** **May:** Trotsky moves to Paris.
September: Trotsky attends the Zimmerwald Conference of anti-war European socialists.

Relations with Lenin

After Trotsky's formal break with the Mensheviks in 1905, he and Lenin had moved closer to one another's views. Lenin praised Trotsky for his achievements with the St Petersburg Soviet and recognised that his talent would be of great value to the Bolsheviks. However, his attempts to enlist Trotsky before the next Party congress were futile. Lenin still had reservations about the theory of permanent revolution, maintaining that a Russian revolution could occur independently of events in Europe. For his part, Trotsky still saw dictatorial tendencies in Lenin's approach.

The London congress of 1907 was the last in which both factions of the Russian Social Democrats were present. Trotsky used this forum to clarify his theory of permanent revolution, which had been criticised for showing a lack of faith in the Russian proletariat. During his speeches he saved his strongest attacks for the Mensheviks, who in seeking the support of middle class liberals, were beginning to pursue a reformist rather than revolutionary agenda. According to Trotsky, the slow process of reform not only meant a compromise of principles with other parties, but it also left

the system of **exploitation** intact. Only a strong revolutionary partnership between the workers and peasants would bring about the final destruction of capitalism.

This was one of many positions shared by Trotsky and Lenin at the London congress. However, Lenin's hopes of making Trotsky a Bolshevik faltered on the issue of reconciliation between the two factions. Despite the philosophical differences that had developed between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, Trotsky continued to believe that the factions were not beyond reconciliation. At times during debates on the issue, Trotsky launched strong attacks on Lenin, who he claimed, was holding the Party to ransom for his own political gain.

Trotsky the internationalist

Trotsky's immersion in European affairs at this time reinforced his growing belief in **internationalism**. As a staunch Marxist, he believed that working class solidarity transcended all national, cultural or racial differences. He spoke several European languages and mixed with a diverse range of people from a number of countries. Living outside Russia for such a long time, Trotsky began to focus on European political developments and the enormous potential for revolution on a worldwide scale. While his commitment to the Russian revolution never faded, he gradually came to see events in Russia as being inextricably linked to Europe affairs. Therefore, instead of viewing the 1905 revolution as a failure, Trotsky saw it as one small part of a broader international trend. This provided the defeated revolutionaries in exile with some hope that, despite recent setbacks, the revolution in Russia was inevitable.

Of all the Russian émigrés, Trotsky worked the hardest to develop close relations with Europe's socialist elite. In Berlin he got to know the stalwarts of German socialism such as Karl Kautsky, the unofficial figurehead of European Marxism; Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the future founders of the German Communist Party; and August Bebel, one of the original founders of the German Social Democratic Party. The German socialists were, in turn, eager to learn about Trotsky's role in the St Petersburg Soviet and how the Russian proletariat had been mobilised against the Tsar. The fact that he stood above the divisions of the Russian Social Democrats also appealed to the Germans, who failed to grasp the reasons for the split.

When the German government refused him residency in Berlin, Trotsky settled with Sedova and their two sons in Vienna where he remained for the next seven years. The family were supported by occasional payments from Trotsky's parents who had become considerably wealthy by this stage. He also received a modest income as

a writer for various European newspapers, the most notable being Vienna's *Pravda*, where he became editor in October 1908. His most significant contributions to the paper counteracted the pessimism of the Russian émigrés in Europe who had begun to despair that the opportunity for revolution had been lost in 1905.

A new party emerges

The relationship between Lenin and Trotsky soon became even more estranged after a major falling out concerning the funding of *Pravda*. Trotsky used the newspaper to make regular appeals for Party unity, something Lenin continued to reject. However, because the paper was severely short of funds Trotsky was forced to seek financial assistance from the Bolshevik-dominated Central Committee of the Party. Lenin agreed to provide *Pravda* with a monthly subsidy, on condition that a liaison officer be appointed to monitor its spending. This was an attempt to ensure that nothing negative was written about the Bolsheviks. It seemed appropriate that Trotsky's Bolshevik brother-in-law Lev Kamenev be assigned the role of liaison officer, given his relation to Trotsky. However things soon turned sour, when Kamenev pressured Trotsky to adopt a tougher position regarding the Mensheviks. A feud between Trotsky and the Central Committee soon erupted. When Kamenev was finally withdrawn as *Pravda*'s liaison officer, the Central Committee, under Lenin's leadership, cut all funding to the paper. A new string of invective soon poured forth as Trotsky accused Lenin of wanting to become the dictator of the Party.

This feud coincided with an emergency conference in Paris, called especially to reconcile the two factions once and for all. Nothing more was achieved, however, than the reinforcement of the deep-seated differences between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. Ultimately the Paris conference further divided the Party, which formally split in early 1912 after Lenin proclaimed the Bolsheviks to be an independent party. When Trotsky used *Pravda* to attack Lenin as the primary instigator of the break, Lenin's response was to publish a Bolshevik newspaper in St Petersburg using the same name as Trotsky's *Pravda*. Naturally, Trotsky was livid and soon accused Lenin of theft and plagiarism.

Trotsky would make one last attempt to unite the Party by calling a special conference of all factions in Vienna in August 1912. When Lenin boycotted this meeting, Trotsky formed the August Bloc, a loose collection of Mensheviks and a few pro-unity Bolsheviks opposed to Lenin. Ultimately however, the August Bloc suffered the same fate as the Party itself, dividing over philosophical differences between its Bolshevik and Menshevik members.

Foreign correspondent from the Balkans

Bitter over the formal separation of the Bolsheviks from the RSDLP, Trotsky sought an escape from politics by becoming the Balkans correspondent for the *Kiev Thought*. Resuming his literary alias of 'Antid Oto' from a decade before, he reported on the First and Second **Balkan** Wars from June 1912 to August 1913. These conflicts were the result of mounting regional tension over competing claims to Macedonia. Tsarist Russia, seeing itself as the international defender of **Slavic** minorities, viewed developments in the Balkans with keen interest.

Trotsky's reporting provided a depth of insight into the region that would soon be labelled the 'powder keg' of Europe. He consistently condemned the war and suggested that a unified Balkan federation of states was the only way to secure long-term peace in the region. His early articles tended to favour the Serbs who had suffered terribly under Turkish oppression during the previous decade. However, when Serbia strengthened its **Pan-Slavic** ties with Tsarist Russia Trotsky changed his sympathies by supporting the Turks.

World War One and the collapse of the Second International

Trotsky was in Vienna on 28 June 1914 when a Serbian nationalist assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian throne. In his articles for the *Kiev Thought* he reported on the torrent of fervent **nationalism** that swept the Austrian capital. In the **July crisis** that followed the assassination, Russia played a key role by giving Serbia unconditional support in the face of Austrian threats. As a result, Trotsky and many other Russian ex-patriates were forced to leave Austria in early August. The family initially went to Switzerland before moving to Paris in May 1915 where they were to remain for the next two years.

The outbreak of World War One was a defining moment in the history of European socialism. Up until World War One, socialists had been relatively united. However, the outbreak of World War One drove a sharp wedge between the revolutionary and reformist branches of socialism. While the revolutionary left – most of whom were Russian – condemned the war as an **imperialist** struggle, the majority of Social Democrats across Europe were easily swept up in the patriotism that greeted the declaration of war.

Trotsky was perplexed by the enthusiasm with which the working class of Europe so willingly joined its class enemies in clamouring to support the war. He dismissed nationalist unity as an illusion and sought to correct the view that the working class had anything to gain from the war. According to Trotsky the war only served the vested interests of capitalism, which would reap handsome profits from wartime production and in victory, would seek new **colonial** markets.

The inability of most socialists to resist the force of **militarism** was typified by the collapse of the **Second International**. As its name suggests, the International was a worldwide conglomerate of socialist political parties formed in 1889 to advance the cause of international socialism. Its vision was derived from the *Communist Manifesto* in which Marx and Engels had called for the workers of the world to unite. With the outbreak of war, however, most socialists abandoned these principles to rally behind their own governments' war efforts. To the architect of permanent revolution, this was tantamount to a cardinal sin and an inexcusable betrayal of the worldwide working class.

Trotsky dealt extensively with these issues in *War and the International*, in which he specifically criticised the **German Social Democrats** for their lack of class loyalty. He proposed that with spread of revolution across Europe, future revolutionary governments should form a United States of Europe, thus making future wars less likely. While no doubt idealistic, these ideas were often misinterpreted as a belief that Russian revolutionaries had nothing to do but wait for the onset of revolution elsewhere.

The Zimmerwald Conference

From the wreckage of the Second International, socialists opposed to the war hoped to reach an agreed position. This occurred on September 5, 1915 with the meeting of thirty-eight prominent anti-war socialists in the Swiss mountain village of Zimmerwald. The Zimmerwald conference was a key moment in the development of the international anti-war movement as it marked the beginning of an attitude-shift among many soldiers and civilians alike. Despite being banned by the combatant governments, copies of the Zimmerwald Manifesto would eventually filter into the trenches, households and factories of Europe.

Trotsky was asked by the delegates of the conference to draft the Zimmerwald Manifesto. This was not a straightforward task as divisions had emerged among the delegation. While the majority were **pacifists** who deplored all war as a means of settling international disputes, the more radical delegates led by Lenin saw the revolutionary potential of the war. He believed that working class soldiers ought to mutiny and then use their weapons to fight a revolutionary civil war. Trotsky had in fact proposed this idea in *War and the International* but was not prepared to endorse it at Zimmerwald, instead calling for a peace 'without victors or vanquished.' Yet despite their apparent differences, Trotsky had more in common with Lenin than the majority of other delegates. Zimmerwald was therefore the beginning of a tentative process of reconciliation between the two.

GLOSSARY

exploitation: to use someone at their expense

internationalism: the belief that people of different nations can have more in common than individuals of the same nation

Balkans: countries on the Balkan Peninsula, located in south-eastern Europe. Before World War One these included Serbia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania

Slavic: people of eastern and central Europe with common language and cultural origins

Pan-Slavism: nineteenth century movement that aimed to unite all Slavic peoples across eastern and central Europe, especially those ruled by the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires

nationalism: the view that one's own nation has primary importance over others

July crisis: the chain of failed diplomatic efforts after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand that led to the outbreak of World War One

imperialist: someone who believes in the extension of an empire through the conquest of other lands

colonial: referring to the overseas parts of an empire that have been acquired through exploration and conquest

militarism: the view that a nation's military might is sufficient reason for its actions

Second International: an organisation of socialists around the world intended to promote the spread of socialism internationally; the Second International lasted from 1889 to 1916.

Communist Manifesto: written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848; outlined the theory of communism and proposed future revolutionary action.

German Social Democrats: the largest German socialist party; originally based on Marxist principles but over time came to prefer gradual reform rather than violent revolution

pacifist: someone who rejects war of any kind as evil

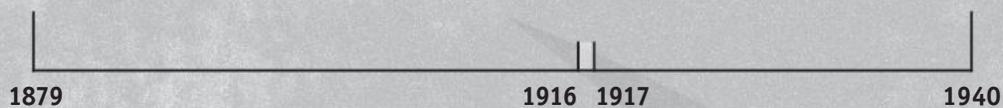
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe Lenin's view on Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.
2. Give reasons why Trotsky criticised the Mensheviks at the London Party Congress.
3. Describe how Trotsky's thinking was shaped by his experiences in Europe.
4. Account for the deterioration in relations between Trotsky and Lenin during this period.
5. Describe the change in Trotsky's career during the Balkans Wars.
6. Compare Trotsky's reaction to the outbreak of World War One with the reactions of other socialists in the Second International.
7. What was the Zimmerwald Conference? Explain Trotsky's role in the conference.



Trotsky and his daughter, Nina, in 1915.

CHAPTER 6:
THE PRELUDE TO
REVOLUTION
(1916-1917)



Timeline

- 1916** **September:** Trotsky is expelled from France, then arrested and detained in Spain.
- 1917** **January:** Trotsky arrives in New York.
- March:** Nicholas II abdicates as Tsar of the Russian empire; the Provisional Government takes power in Russia.
- April:** Trotsky is detained in Halifax, Canada whilst en route to Russia.
- May:** Trotsky returns to Petrograd; becomes an associate member of the Petrograd Soviet.

The New World

On 30 October 1916 Trotsky was ordered to leave France. This occurred after rioting Russian soldiers in the port city of Marseilles were found to be in possession of copies of *Nashe Slovo* (*Our World*). This newspaper had been banned in both Russia and France for its criticism of the war, most of which had been written by Trotsky. The success of the paper showed just how unpopular the war had become among the Russian soldiers.

At first Trotsky feared the French authorities would hand him over to their Russian allies but was relieved when he was escorted to the Spanish border two days later. From here he made his way to the southern Spanish city of Cadiz but within days was arrested by Spanish police. After spending the next three weeks in gaol, Trotsky convinced the authorities to allow him to sail to America. Meeting up with Sedova and their two boys in Barcelona, the family boarded a second-rate vessel called the *Montserrat* in the full belief they would never return to Europe.

The seventeen-day journey saw the family arrive in New York on January 13, 1917. They immediately set about spreading their roots, expecting this to be their permanent home. Suitable accommodation was found and the two boys were enrolled in school to learn English. Trotsky embarked on a lecture tour in which he met other Russian émigrés such as Nikolai Bukharin and Alexandra Kollontai. He was in the middle of his lecture tour when, on February 3, America entered World War One on the side of the Allies. This was overshadowed on 15 March 1917, however, by the news that Tsar Nicholas II had finally **abdicated**.

The February Revolution

Trotsky observed that war was often the mother of revolution and indeed by 1917, Russia stood on the brink of revolution during a war that had become a political disaster for the government. The Eastern Front, which had ground to a bloody **stalemate**, had drained the army of its will to fight. Russia was poorly equipped to fight a war of attrition against enemies with twice the industrial capacity. Russia's troop losses far exceeded those of other nations, as did its rate of desertion. On some sections of the front, soldiers began to form soviets or elected councils modelled on those of the St Petersburg workers. These soldiers' soviets effectively replaced the army's traditional chain of command on many sectors of the Eastern front. Many peasant soldiers simply voted to abandon their positions and return to their farms. By the beginning of 1917, the patriotic fervour shown at the beginning of the war had become a distant memory as Russia teetered on the brink of collapse.

After a nationwide strike led to widespread rioting in the cities, Nicholas II was finally forced to announce his abdication. His younger brother Grand Duke Michael was offered the throne but refused, insisting that a provisional government be formed until elections for a **Constituent Assembly** could take place. By the following week, representatives of the old Duma, which had been dissolved by Nicholas five years earlier, met under the leadership of Prince Gregory Lvov to form the first **Provisional Government**. Three centuries of Romanov rule had come to an abrupt end and with it, the system of autocracy that had denied basic rights to millions of Russians.

An interrupted return to Russia

On learning of the Tsar's abdication, Trotsky immediately made plans to return to Russia. On March 27 he and his family boarded the Norwegian boat *Christianiafford* and farewelled New York. The boat only got as far as Halifax in Canada before the Russian passengers were escorted off the vessel and detained. The authorities identified Trotsky as a dangerous revolutionary in the pay of the Germans and although his wife and children had left Russia on official passports, they too were arrested. While they remained in Halifax, Trotsky was sent to a nearby detention centre for German prisoners of war. During his month-long internment, he formed close ties with many of the German prisoners, telling them the news of revolution in Russia and how Russian soldiers had abandoned the war.

Trotsky had good reason to suspect that the Provisional Government was responsible for his arrest until they could work out what to do with him. After pressure from the reassembled **Petrograd Soviet**, he was released on 29 April. His interrupted return to

Petrograd meant that he was one of the last émigrés to return to Russia on 18 May. On his arrival at Petrograd's Finnish Terminal, support for the February Revolution was evident by a mass of banners and red ribbons carrying revolutionary slogans. After disembarking from the train, Trotsky made a brief speech in which he called for a new revolution to be led by the workers.



Trotsky's arrival in St Petersburg, May 1917. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

Return to the Petrograd Soviet

Trotsky wasted no time in heading straight to the Smolny Institute where the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet was meeting. The Mensheviks and **Social Revolutionaries**, who together formed a majority in the Soviet, gave Trotsky a cool reception. Given his unity with the Bolsheviks in opposing the war, they were uncertain as to his political allegiances. The Bolshevik representatives on the other hand, called for his election to the Executive Committee, arguing that as the previous Chairman of the Soviet in 1905, this was only fair. After a vote, he was made an associate member without voting rights.

Trotsky soon developed closer ties with the Bolsheviks, as they were the only party in the Soviet calling for an end to the war. In the wake of the February Revolution, the Bolsheviks continued to encourage the formation of soldiers' soviets, which multiplied

by the week. This led to a complete breakdown of army discipline and severely limited the government's ability to conduct the war. By April, the crisis in the army had forced the resignation of Prince Lvov and his entire ministry who were replaced by a new coalition of liberals and moderate socialists led by the Social Revolutionary, Alexander Kerensky.

As a member of both the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government, Kerensky's appointment as Prime Minister was an attempt to unite these two competing groups. To encourage the co-operation of the Soviet, six of the sixteen ministries in the new Provisional Government were given to the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. These were also the two largest parties in the Petrograd Soviet and both agreed to use their influence among the soldiers to help restore army discipline. Trotsky responded by publicly condemning the moderate socialists for their marriage of convenience with liberals in the Provisional Government. Echoing Lenin's slogan, he called for the transfer of 'all power to the Soviets'.

The revolutionary orator

With his role in the Soviet limited to that of an interested observer, Trotsky took to the factories and streets to inspire the masses to revolution. Due to the ongoing war and the Provisional Government's failure to bring about land redistribution, the optimism that had initially greeted the February Revolution had now given way to anger and pessimism. Trotsky was able to exploit this sentiment in his speeches, which called for the workers to seize power through the Soviets.

Among Trotsky's favourite speaking venues was the Kronstadt naval base where he would arrive by tugboat sent by the sailors. The Kronstadt sailors were among the most radical of the armed forces. Having seized control of the naval base, they refused to fight and asked Trotsky to write a manifesto on their behalf calling for the government to end the war. When their anger threatened to become violent, it fell to Trotsky to subdue them. In the evening, the Cirque Moderne became his regular venue. He would often speak there until midnight with most of his speeches lasting an hour and some even two. Nevertheless, the crowd was spellbound as Trotsky gave voice to their anger and directed it against those who had failed them. His opponents knew better than to venture into the Cirque Moderne, such was his effect on the crowds. Like the Kronstadt naval base it was regarded as his turf. The demand to hear Trotsky speak was so strong that factories with over a thousand workers would wait for hours before his arrival.

A leader without a party

Despite his popularity among Petrograd's workers and soldiers, by early 1917 Trotsky did not belong to any political party. However, upon his return to Russia, he joined the Inter-Borough Organisation, a small group of unaligned ex-Bolsheviks and ex-Mensheviks who had been inspired by Trotsky's views on international revolution. Although small in number, the Inter-Borough Organisation boasted many high profile members who, like Trotsky, were committed radicals with proven credentials as writers in the revolutionary press. In ideological terms, the Inter-Borough Organisation resembled the Bolsheviks but on a much smaller scale. With a small support base that was limited to Petrograd, the members of the Inter-Borough Organisation soon debated the merits of merging with the Bolsheviks. For Lenin, an amalgamation with the Inter-Borough Organisation would provide a significant boost of quality personnel to the ranks of his party.

On 10 May 1917 Trotsky and Lenin met for the first time since the Zimmerwald conference to discuss a possible merger. This was the clearest indication yet, that the ideological divide between the two men had now all but disappeared. Trotsky had long abandoned his call for reconciliation between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks and Lenin, for his part, had moved closer to Trotsky's views on international revolution. However, it seems that personal pride rather than intellectual differences now kept Trotsky from finally joining 'Lenin's party'. When asked the reasons behind Trotsky's refusal to join the Bolsheviks, Lenin reportedly replied, 'Now don't you know? Ambition, ambition, ambition.'

Yet without an end to the war in sight and the redistribution of land indefinitely delayed, it was inevitable that Trotsky would eventually call himself a Bolshevik. No other party claimed to be the vanguard of a worker's revolution while other socialists were willing to sacrifice the interests of the working class for the sake of a role in the Provisional Government. In sharp contrast, Lenin's promise of 'peace, land and bread' had drawn widespread popular support for the Bolsheviks.

GLOSSARY

abdicate: the act of a monarch giving up his or her throne

stalemate: a deadlock between opponents in which no side can win

Constituent Assembly: an elected parliament made up of representatives from across Russia

Provisional Government: the caretaker government installed after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II. It was intended to administer Russia until elections for a Constituent Assembly could be held in November 1917.

Petrograd: New name for St Petersburg from the outbreak of World War One

Social Revolutionaries: popular Russian revolutionary political party founded in 1902. They drew their support mainly from the peasantry.

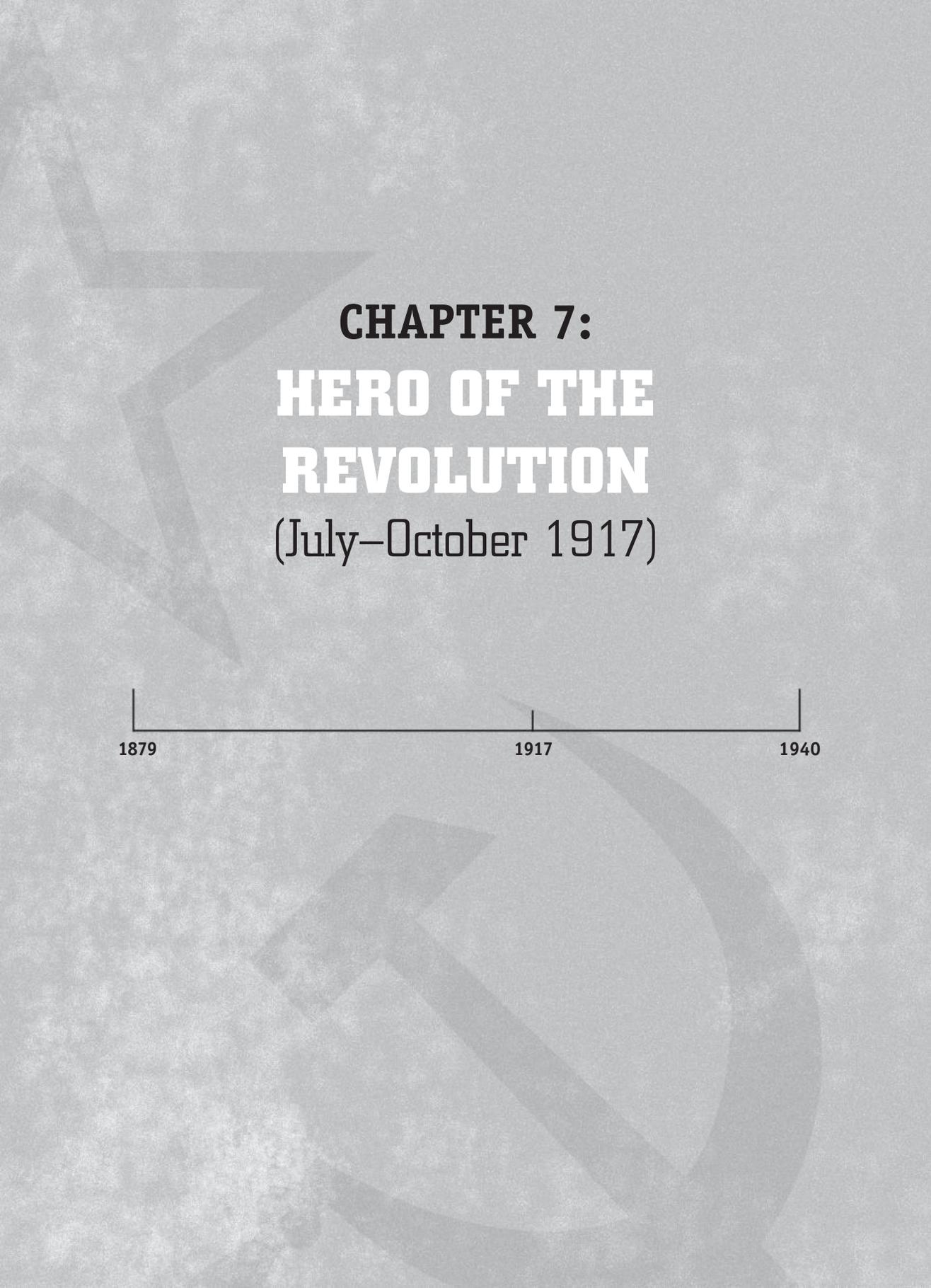
February Revolution: the uprising against Tsar Nicholas II that resulted in his abdication and the end of Tsarist rule in Russia

REVIEW QUESTIONS

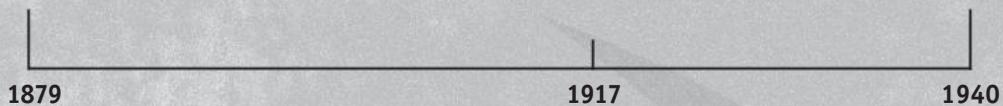
1. Give reasons for Trotsky's expulsion from France in October 1916.
2. Outline Trotsky's activities around the time he learned of the abdication of Nicholas II.
3. Explain why Trotsky was one of the last émigrés to return to Petrograd in 1917.
4. Summarize the nature of Trotsky's criticism of the Mensheviks in 1917.
5. Explain the effect Trotsky's speeches had on his audiences.
6. Account for Trotsky's decision to join the Inter-Borough Organisation after returning to Petrograd.
7. Explain how Lenin and Trotsky managed to reconcile their philosophical differences



Joseph Stalin (L) and Vladimir Lenin (R) around the time of the Revolution.



CHAPTER 7:
HERO OF THE
REVOLUTION
(July–October 1917)



Timeline

1917 July: Bolshevik demonstrations in Petrograd result in government crackdown; Trotsky arrested.

August: Trotsky is accepted as a member of the Bolsheviks at the Sixth Party Congress.

September: Trotsky becomes Chairman of the Petrograd Soviet; Kornilov revolt suppressed.

October: Trotsky becomes Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet; organises and successfully executes the Bolshevik insurrection.

The 'July Days'

It is somewhat ironic that after fifteen years of opposing the Bolsheviks, Trotsky finally decided to join them in perhaps their darkest hour. The 'July days' began on July 16 when Bolshevik supporters took to the streets of Petrograd in a mass demonstration against the war. Impatient with the Party's waiting game, many of its ordinary members protested. For the next two days, workers and soldiers crowded Petrograd in a sign of defiance towards the Provisional Government. This sent shock waves through the Provisional Government, which grew increasingly worried that the Bolsheviks were about to launch an **uprising**. Due to his popularity with the workers, Trotsky joined the Bolshevik leaders in trying to subdue the demonstrators. However, by the second day of the protest as the crowds were beginning to disperse, officers loyal to the government attacked and killed hundreds of Bolshevik supporters.

The situation for the Bolsheviks further deteriorated when news reached the capital of devastating Russian losses against the Austrians in the Kerensky Offensive. Reports in the liberal press blamed the defeat on the Bolsheviks, who they accused of eroding the fighting spirit of the troops. Public opinion reached the point of outrage when the Provisional Government released supposed evidence that Lenin was a German agent. Liberal newspapers carried headlines of Lenin's collusion with the German high command, citing as evidence his assisted passage through Germany three months earlier. On July 18, government troops occupied the offices of *Pravda*, the Bolshevik newspaper and closed down its printing presses. When the arrest of the Bolshevik leadership was ordered, Lenin fled to nearby Finland.

A true Bolshevik

Although identified by the government as a participant in the so-called 'uprising', Trotsky was not arrested because he was not actually a Bolshevik. However, in a remarkable twist he volunteered his own arrest in an open letter written to the Provisional Government on 23 July. As a show of solidarity with the Bolsheviks, he affirmed that his own views were identical to those of the men arrested. 'The fact that I am not...a member of the Bolshevik Party is not due to political differences, but to certain circumstances in our party history which have now lost all significance'. He was arrested two weeks later.

Trotsky was still in prison in early August when he and the other members of the Inter-Borough Organisation were accepted as members of the Bolshevik Party at the sixth congress. At the same time he was elected onto the Bolshevik Central Committee. For Lenin, it was vital that an experienced politician of Trotsky's calibre fill the void left by leaders such as himself, who had gone into hiding. On 4 September Trotsky was



Lenin addressing crowds in St Petersburg; Trotsky is standing by the platform, below his brother-in-law and fellow Bolshevik, Lev Kamenev. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

released from prison after the Provisional Government failed to find reasonable grounds to hold him. The Petrograd Soviet paid his bail of 3000 roubles from donations made by the workers. After his release, Trotsky referred to himself publicly as a Bolshevik and the feud of the last fifteen years was all but forgotten.

The Kornilov revolt

Having dealt with the threat of the Bolsheviks, conservatives within the Provisional Government now set their sights on undermining the soviets themselves. Hundreds of these self-appointed councils had sprung to life within the army since the failure of the Kerensky Offensive and their influence over the ordinary soldier restricted the Provisional Government's ability to conduct the war. Unless their demands for power were suppressed, it seemed that a soviet-led revolution was inevitable.

The soviets had no greater enemy than General Lavr Kornilov, who emerged as the leader of a new counter-revolution. A conservative who deplored the influence of the soviets in the army, Kornilov had been appointed Commander-in-Chief of the army by Kerensky. Sensing that the support of the **Petrograd garrison** was wavering, Kornilov called for the government to hand its authority to him. When Kerensky dismissed him and ordered his return to Petrograd, Kornilov surrounded Petrograd with his troops. As the threat of a **right-wing coup** grew daily, Kerensky was left with no choice but to call on the Bolshevik **Red Guard** to defend the city. Originally formed to defend the soviets, the Red Guard swelled to a force of 25,000 within days of Kerensky's request, as workers and deserted soldiers flocked to its ranks. Once armed, the Red Guard was a large enough obstacle for Kornilov to call off his attack. Ironically though, Kornilov's advance on Petrograd was defeated not with arms but by Bolshevik propaganda that had been disseminated among his troops. Many of his men eventually joined the Red Guard without even firing a shot.

The first Bolshevik President of the Petrograd Soviet

The popularity of the Bolsheviks reached new heights due to their role in preventing the Kornilov coup. As a result, on 9 September they were able to secure a majority in the Petrograd Soviet for the first time, having already achieved this in the Moscow Soviet several weeks earlier. The Bolsheviks then used their numbers to elect Trotsky as the first Bolshevik President of the Petrograd Soviet. In his opening address Trotsky called on the Kerensky government to resign immediately and for all power to be transferred to the **All Russian Congress of Soviets**. With one of their own as president, the Bolsheviks could now plan for an insurrection on behalf of the Soviet itself.

As president, Trotsky used his influence to form the **Military Revolutionary Committee** of the Petrograd Soviet. Initially a Menshevik proposal to defend the city from possible German attacks or other Kornilov-type threats, the Military Revolutionary Committee became a valuable instrument of insurrection in the hands the Bolsheviks. Under Trotsky's leadership, the Military Revolutionary Committee could be used to co-ordinate arms and detachments of Red Guards around the city. Its role in the October **insurrection** the following month would prove vital.

A question of timing

Their success against Kornilov had demonstrated the extent of the Bolsheviks' appeal to the ordinary soldier. By the middle of September members of the Bolshevik Central Committee began discussing the viability of an armed insurrection against the Provisional Government. Both Lenin and Trotsky voted in favour of insurrection, confident that the Bolsheviks could rely on the support of the soldiers. On 10 October the Central Committee voted by ten votes to two in favour of armed insurrection. Zinoviev and Kamenev, the two dissenters, argued that a coup against the Provisional Government should be conducted by a coalition of socialist parties, rather than in the name of the Bolsheviks alone.

At this stage, a date for the insurrection had not been set and the issue continued to divide the Bolshevik leadership. Lenin feared that the right moment would soon pass and pushed for immediate action. With the Bolsheviks riding the crest of support in the wake of their success against Kornilov, he believed that a delay could erode public confidence in the Party. Trotsky on the other hand argued for the insurrection to occur on the eve of the All Russian Congress of Soviets, due to sit on October 20. This was a delay of two weeks but would enable the Bolsheviks to claim that the insurrection had taken place in the name of the Congress. Lenin came around to this view, when on October 16, soldiers of the Petrograd garrison refused Kerensky's orders to leave the city. With the support of the Petrograd garrison now assured, the risk associated with a delay was greatly reduced. However, this left Trotsky only three days to plan the insurrection and he was concerned that the Military Revolutionary Committee would not be prepared. However, when the Menshevik-dominated Central Committee of the Congress decided to delay the Congress's opening by three days, Trotsky was afforded much needed preparation time.

Masterminding the insurrection

With Lenin absent from Petrograd throughout October for fear of arrest, Trotsky took on the leading role of planning the insurrection. Although the Military Revolutionary

Committee had appointed representatives of the army soviets, trade unions and Red Guard to ensure citywide co-ordination of the uprising, Trotsky still remained uncertain about the loyalty of the Petrograd garrison. Their loyalty was assured when the Military Revolutionary Committee's order of 5,000 rifles from the Petrograd garrison was duly supplied.

By the 23 October the logistics of insurrection were in place: the Red Guard had been mobilised, all roads and rail into Petrograd were effectively under Bolshevik control as were key post offices and telegraph points. All that was needed was sufficient provocation from the Provisional Government to cast the Bolshevik insurrection as a defensive action. This came on 23 October when Kerensky ordered the banning of *Pravda*, the Bolshevik newspaper and the closure of its offices and printing presses.

By the following day the Smolny Institute, a former school for the daughters of Petrograd's nobility had been turned into the Bolsheviks' fortified headquarters. The day began with the final meeting of the Central Committee before the decisive act. With Lenin and Zinoviev still in hiding, Trotsky suggested that each member of the Central Committee be assigned a specific role in the uprising. Dzerzhinsky would liaise with the post and telegraph offices, Bubnov would take care of the railways, Sverdlov would watch the movements of the Provisional Government, Nogin and Lomov would maintain contact with Moscow, while Miliutin was given responsibility for the city's food supply. Oddly, Stalin was absent from this historic meeting. For the remainder of the day the MRC, also working from the Smolny Institute, received reports of troop movements, the reactions of other parties, the response from foreign embassies and the activity within the Winter Palace. A constant stream of informers provided up-to-the-minute news from all corners of the city.

A bloodless revolution

In a final sign of Kerensky's impotence, his order for the battleship *Aurora* to leave the river Neva was ignored on Trotsky's instruction. Trotsky then issued **Order 1 of the Petrograd Soviet** calling all armed forces to come to the Soviet's defence. That night Red Guards occupied the Tauride Palace, the site of the Provisional Government, but not before Kerensky managed to escape the city. Most of his ministers, however, sought refuge inside the Winter Palace. While this was happening, Trotsky's plan to seize control of post offices and telephone exchanges, railway stations, the national bank and the power stations was carried out swiftly and without incident. When Lenin arrived at the Smolny Institute late on 24 October, he could scarcely believe the news that the insurrection was virtually complete. All that remained was to seize the Winter Palace and arrest the remaining ministers of the Provisional Government.

The following day, Red Guards surrounded the Winter Palace and at midday Trotsky stood before the Petrograd Soviet to declare:

On behalf of the Military Revolutionary Committee, I declare that the Provisional Government is no longer existent. Some ministers have been arrested. Others will be arrested in the course of a few hours...the citizen slept in peace, ignorant of the change from one power to another.

By the evening of 25 October, Trotsky was exhausted, having gone without sleep for several days. The night before he had fainted with fatigue and now with Lenin at his side, the two decided to rest. Within a few hours, both men would announce to the All Russian Congress of Soviets that the government had passed into its hands and with it, an end to the war and the immediate transfer of all land to the peasants. Whilst waiting for the opening of the Congress, a report reached Trotsky that Red Guards were meeting resistance in attempting to capture the Winter Palace. In response Trotsky ordered the *Aurora* to fire on the Winter Palace.

When the All Russian Congress of Soviets opened, the Bolsheviks had a majority of nearly two-thirds. The **Left Social Revolutionaries** had joined them, effectively handing the Bolsheviks a three-quarters majority in the Congress. Needless to say, the defeated parties were indignant. In protest a small group of Mensheviks stormed out of the Congress. Lenin flatly rejected a demand by the remaining Mensheviks to form a coalition government between themselves, the Bolsheviks and the Social Revolutionaries. After the Mensheviks called for a boycott of the Congress, Trotsky responded with a speech that laid to rest any thought of his Menshevik past,

An uprising of the people needs no justification... We have been forging, openly, the will of the masses for an uprising. Our uprising has won. And now we are asked to give up our victory, to come to an agreement. With whom? You are wretched, disunited individuals; you are bankrupts; your part is over. Go to the place where you belong from now on – the dust-bin of history.
(Trotsky, L. *My Life*, p. 257)

GLOSSARY

uprising: an organised popular rebellion against authority

Petrograd garrison: troops stationed in Petrograd to defend the city from attack. They could also be used to subdue civil unrest.

right-wing coup: an attempt by a relatively small group of conservatives to seize government by force

Red Guard: volunteer militiamen belonging to the Bolsheviks.

All Russian Congress of Soviets: the supreme council of representatives from soviets across Russia

Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC): committee of the Petrograd Soviet formed initially to defend Petrograd from attack. The Bolsheviks used it to co-ordinate their insurrection.

insurrection: an organised rebellion against an established authority

Order 1 of the Petrograd Soviet: the first decree of the Petrograd Soviet that gave it control of the military; the Provisional Government henceforth had to seek the permission of the Soviet to use troops.

Left Social Revolutionaries: a radical faction of the Social Revolutionaries who supported the Bolshevik insurrection

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain how the failed Kerensky Offensive affected support for the Bolsheviks.
2. Describe how Trotsky demonstrated his support for the Bolsheviks during the July Days.
3. Give reasons why Lenin finally accepted Trotsky into his party.
4. Explain how Trotsky's appointment as President of the Petrograd Soviet helped the Bolsheviks.
5. Explain why Trotsky argued for a delay to the date of the insurrection.
6. Describe Trotsky's management of the Bolshevik insurrection.

TROTSKY'S RISE TO PROMINENCE

(1905–1917)

SOURCE INVESTIGATIONS

Question 1

- (a) State TWO words used to describe the workers in Source 5.
- (b) According to Source 5, what rights have workers been deprived of?
- (c) Who is blamed in Source 5 for the death of workers?
- (d) According to Source 6, why did Trotsky join Lenin's 'great party'?
- (e) Why, according to Source 6, did Lenin 'need' Trotsky?

Question 2

Use Sources 6 and 8 as well as your own knowledge, to explain how Leon Trotsky rose to a position of prominence in Russia by 1917.

Question 3

To what extent are Sources 7 and 8 useful for an historian studying Trotsky's rise to prominence in the period from 1905 to 1917. In your answer refer to the reliability and perspective of each source.

SOURCE FILE

Source 5

Workers! Exploited, deprived of your rights, despised – you were recognized as brothers and comrades at the outbreak of the war before you were summoned to march to the shambles, to death. And now, when militarism has crippled, lacerated, degraded, and destroyed you, the rulers are demanding from you the abandonment of your interests, of your aims, of your ideals – in a word, slavish submission to the 'national truce'. You are prevented from expressing your views, your feelings, your pain; you are not allowed to put forth your demands and to fight for them. The press is muzzled, political rights and liberties are trampled upon – thus is military dictatorship ruling today with the iron hand.

Trotsky, L. *The Zimmerwald Manifesto*. September 1915, Trotsky Internet Archive.

Source 6

Lenin was the recognised leader of a great party, which...had already become the rallying ground for all proletarian opposition to the February regime. Trotsky and his friends were a pleiade of brilliant generals without an army. As an individual, Trotsky could make his voice heard from the platforms of the revolution; but only a massive and well-disciplined party could now transform words into lasting deeds. Each side needed the other.

Deutscher, I. *The Prophet Armed*. p.213

Source 7

I usually spoke in the Circus in the evening, sometimes quite late at night. My audience was composed of workers, soldiers, hard-working mothers, and street urchins – the oppressed underdogs of the capital. Every square inch was filled, every human body compressed to its limit...No speaker, no matter how exhausted, could resist the electric tension of that impassioned human throng. They wanted to know, to understand, to find their way. At times it seemed as if I felt, with my lips, the stern inquisitiveness of this crowd that had become merged into a single whole.

Trotsky, L. *My Life*. p.230

Source 8

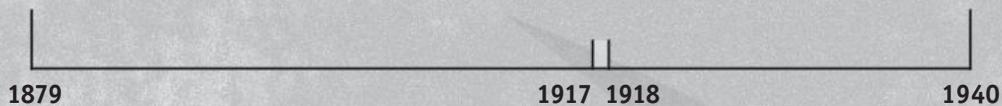
What has taken place is an uprising, not a conspiracy. An uprising of the masses of the people needs no justification. We have been strengthening the revolutionary energy of the workers and soldiers. We have been forging, openly, the will of the masses for an uprising. Our uprising has won. And now we are being asked to give up our victory, to come to an agreement. With whom? You are wretched, disunited individuals; you are bankrupts; your part is over. Go to the place where you belong from now on the dustbin of history!

Trotsky, L. Speech to the All Russian Congress of Soviets. 25 October 1917.

EXTENDED RESPONSE QUESTIONS

- (a) Outline the main achievements in Leon Trotsky's career to 1917.
- (b) 'By joining the Bolsheviks at the eleventh hour, Trotsky simply backed the horse that was most likely to win.' In light of this statement, evaluate the view that Trotsky joined the Bolsheviks in 1917 only to further his political career.

CHAPTER 8:
THE PROBLEM
OF PEACE
(1917–1918)



Timeline

- 1917** **October:** Bolsheviks begin implementing socialism in Russia. Trotsky is appointed as Peoples' Commissar for Foreign Affairs.
- December:** Trotsky arrives at Brest-Litovsk for peace negotiations with the Germans.
- 1918** **January:** Brest-Litovsk negotiations continue; Trotsky employs delaying tactics.
- February:** Central Committee votes to accept German peace terms. Trotsky resigns as Foreign Commissar; becomes Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs
- March:** Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is signed.

Birth of the world's first workers' state

After their seizure of power the Bolsheviks immediately set about fulfilling their promise of 'peace, land and bread'. The majority of peasant soldiers in the Russian army abandoned their positions on the Eastern Front once the long-awaited land decree was passed. This effectively divided the vast estates of the Russian nobility into 25 million smaller plots, granting most peasants ownership of the land their families had worked on for generations.

The new Bolshevik government also sanctioned the **collective ownership** of capital, although workers' soviets had themselves begun seizing control of factories months before the October coup. The bourgeoisie were dispossessed of their assets and henceforth the producers of capital would be its owners. Workers' rights, including an eight-hour day and employment insurance for injuries, sick leave and unemployment were also introduced. The abolition of rank in the military and other class-specific titles reflected the dawn of a new classless society where all citizens would relate as equals. The salutation of 'comrade' to every citizen demonstrated this new equality.

Violence against opposition parties soon became justified in terms of removing class traitors. By definition, a classless society could not exist if class opposition remained. The establishment of the **Cheka** in December 1917 helped the Bolsheviks deal with the remnants of the old regime. Trotsky claimed that there was nothing immoral about the use of terror against opponents of the revolution as they had once oppressed others.

Appointment as Foreign Commissar

Shortly after the Bolshevik takeover, Lenin offered Trotsky the Presidency of the newly formed Council of the People's Commissars (or **Sovnarkom**). Although Trotsky refused, suggesting that the party leader should be the head of the government, this was the clearest demonstration yet of Lenin's support. He did however, accept the next most significant post, **Commissar for Foreign Affairs**. A favourable peace settlement with Germany was the first major test of the new Bolshevik government and Trotsky realised that the fate of the revolution itself depended on Russia's removal from the war. As Foreign Commissar, Trotsky was the leading negotiator with the Germans.

The Bolshevik Revolution had had major reverberations around Europe. Trotsky believed that the nations at war had begun to fear revolution at home as much as they feared losing the war itself. Therefore, his first act as Foreign Commissar was to make a universal call for peace without indemnities. In doing so, he hoped that the soldiers of other nations would be inspired to follow the Russian example.

Brest-Litovsk

On December 24 Trotsky was sent to the German-occupied town of Brest-Litovsk in Poland to head the Soviet peace delegation. After agreeing to a cease-fire, discussions with the Germans proceeded smoothly as the Bolsheviks were not the government that had declared war. Trotsky had also sent positive overtures to the Germans by publishing the **secret treaties** made by the former regime. However, when Britain and France ignored Trotsky's call for a **universal armistice**, Russia's position became seriously weakened. Russian troops had all but deserted the Eastern Front leaving the way open for a German advance. With neither the will nor the capacity to fight on, the Bolsheviks clung to the slim hope that a revolution in Germany would deliver a friendly government and therefore eliminate the need for negotiations at all.



Trotsky and other Russian delegates at Brest-Litovsk, January 1918. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

Once it was apparent that Russia was on its own, Germany's Foreign Minister Richard von Kuhlmann indicated that peace would be costly to the Bolsheviks. Nothing less than her complete surrender would be acceptable. The unity of the Bolshevik leadership was at once tested over how they ought to respond to Germany's 'predatory peace'. Lenin wanted an immediate acceptance of Germany's terms, arguing that the fledgling Soviet government faced the more pressing threat of counter-revolution. Members of the **Left Communists** however, were convinced that German troops were on the verge of mutiny. This presented an opportunity to turn the war into a series of revolutionary uprisings around Europe. They believed that an acceptance of Germany's harsh demands would simply strengthen the German government at its weakest moment, rather than hasten its collapse.

'Neither peace, nor war'

As the architect of permanent revolution, Trotsky appreciated the stance of the left communists. At the same time, he also had real fears that a German advance would lead to the fall of Petrograd and the destruction of the revolution itself. He therefore proposed a new formula for the negotiations with the Germans that became known as 'neither peace, nor war'. In effect, he wanted to delay the final settlement for as long as possible in the hope that revolutionary conditions in Germany would bring about the collapse of their government. A new German government, no longer committed to the war, would willingly accept a peace settlement without annexations or indemnities. This had been promised to the Russian people and Trotsky hoped to preserve Bolshevik integrity by delivering a settlement that didn't ruin Russia.

This delicate balancing act of delay was soon upset when the German delegation discovered that Bolshevik propaganda was being disseminated among German troops. Prior to the negotiations the Bolshevik Central Committee had approved two million roubles for the printing of revolutionary propaganda in German. Kuhlman was furious and threatened to resume the fighting. Trotsky's strategy, however, continued to assume that the Germans would not carry out their threats and by ignoring ultimatum after ultimatum he hoped to buy more time for the European revolution.

When the Germans resumed their offensive against Russia, the Bolshevik leadership became sharply divided over how they ought to respond. On 17 February the Central Committee voted but after eight ballots, no clear majority could be reached. The Bolshevik leadership was evenly split between those who wanted to resume a revolutionary war, led by Bukharin, and those who wanted immediate peace, led by Lenin. Trotsky's single vote could have delivered a majority to either faction but instead of casting his vote for one of the two alternatives, he offered a third way - new negotiations with the Germans while the results of their new offensive could

be properly assessed. By the following day, however, the Germans were on the march to the Ukraine with virtually no resistance in their path. The deadlock between Bukharin's war faction and Lenin's peace faction was finally broken after Trotsky relented and voted with Lenin. On 19 February, the Bolshevik government officially agreed to peace in a cable sent by Lenin and Trotsky to the Germans.

A costly peace

When the German demands arrived on 21 February they were considerably worse than those originally proposed. Trotsky was dismayed. With their troops on the doorstep of the Ukraine, the Germans could afford to make considerably harsher demands. Suddenly Trotsky's tactics of delay appeared to have backfired. With Petrograd now vulnerable, the Germans insisted on the unconditional acceptance of their ultimatum within forty-eight hours. On the day the ultimatum expired, the Central Committee voted by seven to four in favour of accepting surrender. Trotsky and three of his supporters abstained from voting, effectively allowing Lenin's proposal for immediate peace to pass. This seems to have occurred after Lenin suggested he might resign as leader of the Party if the war was allowed to continue.

Trotsky immediately offered his resignation as Foreign Commissar, refusing to carry out the humiliating task of signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This unenviable task was given to Gregory Chicherin, the new Foreign Commissar, who headed the Soviet delegation that finally signed the treaty on 3 March 1918.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk saw Russia lose Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Poland, Belarus and the Ukraine – territories that had been acquired over centuries of Tsarist expansion. The Soviet government was required to pay six billion German marks as reparations for a war it had always opposed. This was a task made all the more difficult by the fact that half of Russia's industrial capacity and nine-tenths of her coal mines were given over to the Germans. In all, one-third of the population of the former Russian empire was given to Germany.

The Brest-Litovsk episode did much to damage Trotsky's reputation. In less than six months his rising star had fallen. From hero of the revolution, his name was now associated with the shame and humiliation of Brest-Litovsk. While peace had been secured, it was far from the peace without indemnities that had been promised by the Bolsheviks. For many inside the party, Trotsky's waiting game had only succeeded in draining an already backward Russian economy of much needed resources. Furthermore, Russia's frontiers were now even less secure than they had been under the old regime. Despite the fact that within a year the victorious Allies would annul the treaty, in later years Trotsky's political adversaries would use the Brest-Litovsk debacle to destroy his reputation.

GLOSSARY

collective ownership: the equal sharing of capital and profits by workers

Cheka: Russian abbreviation for Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage; the Bolshevik secret police

Sovnarkom: Russian abbreviation for the Council of People's Commissars; the Bolshevik-dominated seat of government through which all new laws were created

Commissar for Foreign Affairs: Bolshevik Minister responsible for diplomacy with other nations

secret treaties: agreements made by the Tsarist government without the knowledge of its main rivals

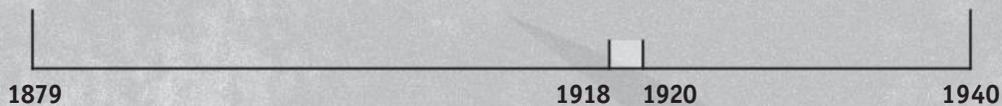
universal armistice: a cease-fire agreed to by all combatant nations

left communists: members of the Bolshevik party who believed in helping spread the revolution outside Russia; considered the most radical faction within the Bolshevik Party

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Suggest reasons why the Bolsheviks believed that they could achieve a peace 'without indemnities'.
2. What did Trotsky hope to achieve as Commissar for Foreign Affairs?
3. Contrast Lenin's views on peace with Germany and those of the left communists.
4. Explain why Trotsky adopted a negotiating strategy that sought 'neither peace, nor war'.
5. Why did the German delegation at Brest-Litovsk become indignant with the Bolsheviks?
6. Explain how Trotsky's vote in the Central Committee determined the outcome of the peace settlement with Germany.
7. Discuss the effect of the Brest-Litovsk negotiations on Trotsky's reputation.

CHAPTER 9:
SAVIOUR OF THE
REVOLUTION
(1918–1920)



Timeline

- 1918** **March:** Trotsky is appointed Commissar for Military Affairs; forms the Red Army.
- April:** Civil War between the Red and White Armies begins.
- July:** Former Tsar Nicholas II and his family are executed in Ekaterinburg.
- September:** Trotsky is appointed chairman of the Military Revolutionary Council; dismisses Stalin as Commissar for Southern Russia.
- November:** World War 1 ends; armistice is signed between the Allies and Germans.
- 1919** **November:** Trotsky is awarded Order of the Red Banner for defending the revolution.
- 1920** End of the Civil War; last of the White armies withdraw from Soviet Russia.

A civilian as War Commissar

It was inevitable that after the Bolshevik coup, remnants of the old regime would soon stage a **counter-revolution**. By early 1918, a combined force of various groups opposed to the October Revolution had begun to form. This White Army was a loose coalition of **royalists**, liberals and socialists – all intent on rescuing Russia from Bolshevism. The Whites were also given financial and military aid from Britain, France and the United States who desperately wanted to re-open the Eastern Front against the Germans. About 50,000 foreign troops including Serbs, Italians, Czechs and Japanese soldiers also fought with the Whites.

With the threat of civil war looming, Petrograd and Moscow were virtually defenceless. A new **Red Army** had to be built from almost nothing. This task was essentially a political one, as the side that could harness the support of the peasantry would most likely emerge victorious. A leader with vast political talent was therefore needed to win the hearts and minds of ordinary peasants who made up over 80% of the Russian population. To achieve this mammoth task, Lenin appointed Trotsky as **Commissar for War** in March 1918. Trotsky had already demonstrated his tactical skills during the October insurrection and Lenin declared that no other member of the party was capable of saving the revolution.

Building the Red Army

As War Commissar, Trotsky had to mobilise a population totally exhausted by war. The Red Guard, which had been so successful in carrying out the October insurrection, lacked the training to fight a conventional battle. With only 4000 Red Guards in Petrograd and another 3000 in Moscow, the Bolshevik forces were far too small to stop the advancing White armies. Having used their opposition to World War 1 as a propaganda weapon to defeat the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks now faced the task of convincing the war-weary peasantry that the revolution was worth saving. Russia's old army had all but collapsed against the Germans and most peasants resisted fighting in the civil war.

Trotsky's first task was to enlist recruits into the Red Army. He established local recruiting posts that initially targeted members of the party and the local soviets. When this proved ineffective, **conscription** was immediately introduced. The first to be called up were the most loyal Bolshevik supporters, beginning with 10,000 industrial workers from Petrograd. The next to be drafted were masses of peasants within Bolshevik controlled areas. At the height of the Civil War, the vast majority of Red Army soldiers were conscripts.

One of the major obstacles in creating an effective army was the power of the soviets over the ordinary soldier. As long as these autonomous bodies continued to exist, the army was impossible to manage. Soviets had effectively replaced the high command of the old army with their own elected officers and this had led to the promotion of popular rather than talented men. Instead of receiving orders from above the soviets made decisions by **consensus**. This made the decision-making process within the army slow and ineffective. Trotsky therefore disbanded the soldiers' soviets. He also reintroduced rank and promotion by appointment in an attempt to bring strict control in the Red Army under his central leadership.



Trotsky, as War Commissar, inspecting Red Army troops.
Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

Trotsky was determined to avoid the problem of desertion that had crippled the Tsar's army. While the proletariat were generally keen to serve in the Red Army, the majority of peasant soldiers were far less reliable. Many peasants had deserted the eastern front during the rule of the Provisional Government and welcomed the Bolsheviks' promise of immediate peace. Although they feared a White victory would return their new land to its former owners, many peasants wanted to avoid fighting at all costs. To inspire peasant soldiers with revolutionary conviction, Trotsky formed regiments where peasants fought side by side with the most loyal supporters of the revolution, the workers.

Using the 'bricks of the old house'

Trotsky also had to deal with a lack of qualified officers willing to fight for the Reds. Most experienced officers from the Tsar's army decided to join the Whites once the Bolsheviks seized power. To solve the officer shortage, Trotsky turned to former Tsarist officers who had not yet joined the Whites. This controversial decision was justified to critics within the party as using 'the bricks of the old house to help build the new'. Despite Lenin's nervous approval, others in the party saw these officers as class enemies who would inevitably sabotage the Red Army from within. In reality, however, Trotsky had little choice but to suspend his ideological prejudices. The only career soldiers available were those who had fought for the Tsar and these officers of the old regime possessed desperately needed leadership skills.

Nevertheless, Red Army officers were often the targets of White propaganda intended to get them to switch sides. To counter this, all soldiers of the Red Army were required to take the Socialist Military Oath that pledged their life to the defence of the Soviet republic. **Political commissars** were also attached to every officer from the commander-in-chief himself to each unit captain. These officials were appointed from among the most fervent Bolsheviks and were required to report any treasonous military or political behaviour. Because political commissars had to countersign all military orders, tension between officers and their commissar was common. To assert their authority many commissars reported the innocent actions of officers as sabotage or cowardice. Use of the death penalty and threats against their families also deterred many officers from betraying the Red Army.

At the end of the first year of the Civil War the officer shortage had been filled and ex-Tsarist officers eventually made up three-quarters of all officers in the Red Army. In July 1918 the Bolshevik Central Committee ordered the execution of the former royal family and the Whites were deprived of any opportunity to rally the support of former Tsarist officers behind Nicholas II. The restoration of military decorations such as the Order of the Red Banner also provided soldiers with incentive to fight. At one point however, Trotsky complained that the Red Banner was being devalued due to the extraordinarily high number being awarded.

Trotsky's train

At the outbreak of the Civil War the Bolsheviks had the major advantage of controlling the rail network. Not only was this critical for supplying the Red Army, but it also allowed Trotsky to regularly visit each of the four fronts in his specially appointed train. Over the course of the war it is estimated that Trotsky travelled approximately 200,000 kilometres by rail. This enabled him to get up-to-date news from the front, while his presence at the front also had a motivating effect on the soldiers. Most knew that he often risked his life to visit them and on several occasions during the Civil War Trotsky's train was actually derailed by artillery fire. His speeches to the troops were as impassioned as those he had given several years earlier on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution. He implored the soldiers to defend the revolution with their lives and to fight to protect the gains it had given them.

The train itself, officially known as the Train of the Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, was both a mobile headquarters and travelling **propaganda bureau**. On board were a printing press, a telegraph station, a radio station, an electric power station, a library, a garage and a bath. Its twelve carriages carried 250 people. These included a propaganda unit, a machine gun unit, a team of drivers, a track repair crew and a bodyguard of Latvian riflemen dedicated to protecting Trotsky. When the train became too long, it was divided in two and an aviation unit of two aeroplanes was added, as were several cars and a brass band. All carriages were armour plated.

The propaganda unit on board produced simple leaflets that were easily understood by illiterate peasants as well as its own newspaper, *On Guard*. The propaganda unit was also responsible for the political education of the crew and was vital in winning local support at the most critical sections of the front. At each stopping point, the unit went to work enlisting new recruits for the Red Army. The communications crew sent crucial information to the Central Committee, now located in Moscow. This ensured that their decisions were made based on up-to-date information received directly from the front.



Trotsky aboard his armoured train at Tsaritsyn, 1918.
Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

Red Terror

An attempted assassination of Lenin in September 1918 showed how widespread dissention had become during the Civil War. In response, the Bolsheviks began a period of brutal repression of the peasants known as the **Red Terror**. Initially, this targeted those peasants who had begun controlling the distribution of food to the Red Army, thanks to their newfound ownership of land. This resulted in critical food shortages in the cities. **Grain requisitioning** from the peasants was often carried out with brutality and disregard for property and on top of this, an emergency grain tax turned many peasants against the Reds.

In the space of a few months during 1919, there were over 100,000 new cases of desertion from the Red Army. To stop this trend, Trotsky introduced the death penalty for desertion, ordering officers to conduct the summary execution of any deserter found. When he realised, however, that many officers did not have revolvers to carry out the death sentence, he issued orders that all revolvers not used in active duty be handed over. For the peasants who remained at their posts, low morale and a poor fighting spirit were typical. Retreat was all too common and in response Trotsky ordered the use of **blocking units**. These were brigades of loyal soldiers who followed unreliable companies into battle. Blocking units mostly prodded stragglers but were ordered to shoot anyone who retreated. Soldiers therefore came to realise that death, while possible if they advanced, was certain if they retreated. Military justice within the Red Army was also harsh, as **field tribunals** gave no right of appeal to deserters. Executions were to be carried out within 24 hours.

Seeds of a rift with Stalin

It was during the Civil War that the first signs of strain in the relationship between Trotsky and Joseph Stalin emerged. When Voroshilov, the commander of the Red Army in the south, refused to fight the White Army, Trotsky ordered his dismissal. Stalin, who was the chief political commissar for the south backed his good friend, Voroshilov. The standoff was broken in September 1918 when Trotsky used his new authority as chairman of the **Military Revolutionary Council** to demote Voroshilov and dismiss Stalin. Stalin then appealed to Lenin, criticising Trotsky's handling of the southern front and even suggesting he had gathered former Tsarist generals around him to challenge Lenin. Lenin dismissed this suggestion and assured Trotsky of his full support.

Clashes with other Central Committee members over the handling of the war marked the beginning of Trotsky's political isolation. In conducting the war, the line of authority between the Central Committee and the War Commissar was never fully clear. Technically, the Central Committee could overrule any decision of the War Commissar and constant tension existed over the disposition of forces and the appointment of

key positions. In July 1919, when the Central Committee voted to dismiss Colonel Vatsetis as the Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army, Trotsky offered to resign as War Commissar. Trotsky had appointed Vatsetis and his dismissal was seen as a major criticism of his handling of the war. Indignant at this interference, Trotsky appealed to Lenin who reinstated Vatsetis and declared his full confidence in Trotsky.

Red Victory

At one point Petrograd almost fell to Yudenich's White forces but Trotsky's well co-ordinated defence of the city managed to hold out. He even went as far as riding on horseback to inspire the panic-stricken Red soldiers on the outskirts of the city. On 22 November 1919, Trotsky was awarded the Order of the Red Banner by the Central Committee and hailed the father of victory. By the following year, White forces had completely withdrawn from Russia. The Red Army victory in the Civil War marked the third major achievement of Trotsky's life, after his chairmanship of the St Petersburg Soviet and his orchestration of the October Revolution.



Lenin and Trotsky celebrate the victory of the Red Army in the Civil War. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

The offensives of the White Army were never properly co-ordinated and a joint assault across four fronts may well have defeated the Reds. Separated by huge distances, communication between the White generals was extremely poor and their supply lines were stretched beyond their capabilities. Trotsky's main strategy was to ensure that the Red Army never lost control of the main industrial centres of Moscow and Petrograd. This gave the Reds control over the railways, enabling fast transport of troops to the most urgent front. Control of the factories also gave the Bolsheviks a much higher production of munitions.

By the war's end Trotsky had built an army of over five million men, mostly through conscription. Compared to the Whites, who could raise only 250,000 soldiers, the Red Army had an overwhelming force of numbers. Bolshevik propaganda, for which Trotsky was largely responsible, was also considerably more effective than that of the Whites. Trotsky continually exploited the fact if the Whites were victorious, land would be returned to its previous owners. To the ordinary peasant, this meant a return to inequality and exploitation.

GLOSSARY

counter-revolution: an attempt by the former ruling class to restore their authority and reverse the effects of the revolution

royalists: supporters of the Tsar who wanted the return of the monarchy

Red Army: army created by the Bolsheviks to defend the revolution

Commissar for War: Bolshevik Minister responsible for the Civil War effort

conscription: compulsory military service

consensus: decision-making by majority agreement

Political Commissars: committed communists appointed to ensure the loyalty of Red Army officers during the Civil War

propaganda bureau: a team or organisation that co-ordinates the distribution of biased or persuasive information

Red Terror: campaign by the Bolsheviks to terrorise the peasantry into supporting the Red Army

grain requisitioning: forced seizure of grain from the peasantry

blocking units: squads of loyal Red Army soldiers who were ordered to shoot any Red Army soldier who retreated

field tribunals: military courts conducted on the field of battle ensuring instant punishment

Military Revolutionary Council: the supreme military authority under the Bolsheviks

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain why Lenin appointed Trotsky as Commissar for War at the outbreak of the Civil War.
2. Describe how Trotsky exerted control over the Red Army.
3. Discuss how Trotsky dealt with the officer shortage in the Red Army.
4. Describe how Trotsky ensured the loyalty of his officers.
5. Explain why Trotsky's train was important to the Red Army.
6. Explain how and why the Red Terror was carried out during the Civil War.
7. Give reasons why Trotsky clashed with Stalin during the Civil War.

TROTSKY'S POLITICAL CAREER

(1917–1922)

SOURCE INVESTIGATIONS

Question 1

- (a) Using Source 9, state TWO ways Trotsky helped the Bolshevik uprising succeed.
- (b) According to Source 10, what role did Stalin play in the Bolshevik uprising?
- (c) Explain how Sources 9 and 10 contradict one another.

Question 2

Using Sources 11 and 12 as well as your own knowledge, explain Trotsky's role in the Civil War.

Question 3

To what extent are Sources 10 and 12 useful for an historian studying Trotsky's achievements in the period from 1917-1922? In your answer refer to the reliability and perspective of each source.

SOURCE FILE

Source 9

All practical work in connection with the organisation of the (Bolshevik) uprising was done under the immediate direction of Comrade Trotsky, the President of the Petrograd Soviet. It can be stated with certainty that the Party is indebted primarily and principally to Comrade Trotsky for the rapid going over of the garrison to the side of the Soviet and the efficient manner in which the work of the Military Revolutionary Committee was organised.

Stalin, J. *Pravda*, November 6, 1918

Source 10

On October 16 an enlarged meeting of the Central Committee of the Party was held. The meeting elected a *Party Centre*, headed by Comrade Stalin, to direct the (Bolshevik) uprising. This Party Centre was the leading core of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet and had practical direction of the whole uprising.

Stalin, J.(ed).1939. *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*.(p.206).

This book was the only version of Soviet history permitted in the USSR and was personally edited by Stalin himself.

Source 11

This excerpt refers to Trotsky's role in the Civil War, 1918–1920.

I issued an order which was printed on the press in my train and distributed throughout the army: 'I give warning that if any unit retreats without orders, the first to be shot down will be the commissar of the unit, and next the commander. Brave and gallant soldiers will be appointed in their places. Cowards, bastards and traitors will not escape the bullet. This I solemnly promise in the presence of the entire Red Army.'

Trotsky, L. *My Life*.(p. 315).

Source 12

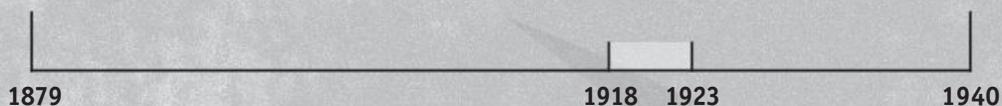


Bolshevik propaganda poster produced during the Civil War. Trotsky is depicted as a brave knight destroying the evil serpent of the old regime. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

EXTENDED RESPONSE QUESTIONS

- (a) Outline the major achievements in the career of Leon Trotsky from 1917 to 1922.
- (b) 'There is no finer Bolshevik,' said Lenin referring to Trotsky in 1921. In light of this statement, assess the importance of Leon Trotsky to the Bolsheviks in the period from 1917 to 1922.

CHAPTER 10:
CONSOLIDATING
THE REVOLUTION
(1918–1923)



Timeline

- 1918** War Communism introduced by the Bolsheviks
- 1919** Founding of Comintern (Third Communist International); Trotsky is elected onto the Comintern Executive Committee.
- 1920** Rural famine kills 5 million peasants. Trotsky is appointed Commissar for Transport.
- November:** All Russian Conference of Trade Unions; Trotsky calls for unions to be state-run.
- 1921** **March:** Trotsky plays a leading role in suppressing the Kronstadt uprising. Tenth Party Congress adopts the New Economic Policy (NEP) and bans factionalism.
- 1922** **April:** Stalin becomes General Secretary of the Party.
- May:** Lenin suffers his first stroke. The triumvirate of Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev begins to form.
- December:** Lenin suffers a second stroke.
- 1923** **April:** Twelfth Party Congress; Trotsky blames the NEP for creating a 'scissors crisis'.
- October:** The Platform of 46 (Trotsky supporters) call for an end to the NEP.

Implementing War Communism

At the height of the Civil War the Bolsheviks faced an economic crisis that threatened the revolution as much as the White armies. Of particular concern was the hopelessly inadequate supply of food to the cities and the Red Army. Mass enlistment of workers into the army had also created a critical labour shortage that resulted in a sharp fall in industrial productivity. Despite their political power the Bolsheviks had little control over industry, which had effectively been transferred to thousands of factory soviets. By 1918, Russia's industrial capacity had dramatically fallen to only 20% of its pre-1914 level.

As early as 1918, the Bolsheviks responded to these problems with a set of policies designed to impose strict state control over food distribution and industry. Collectively referred to as **War Communism** many of these initiatives had come at Trotsky's suggestion. Historians have debated whether the policies of War Communism were a genuine attempt to build a communist economy or simply a pragmatic response to the crises at hand. Although the policy was eventually abandoned, many elements of War Communism such as the **nationalisation** of factories and grain requisitioning returned during the Stalinist era.

As a vocal advocate of War Communism, Trotsky sought to solve the problems of industry with the same methods he had used to build and control the Red Army. Conscription of labour into the most critical industries was applied, as was strict control and supervision of workers. To bring Russia's industry under government control, Trotsky proposed the creation of **labour armies**. The first labour armies were drafted from divisions of the Red Army that could be spared during the latter stages of the Civil War. Discipline in the labour armies was harsh, especially for workers who did not achieve their targets. Absenteeism was virtually eliminated through a combination of extreme penalties and propaganda. Eventually, even the eight-hour day was ignored so that production levels would improve.

To maximise production Trotsky supported the elimination of independent **trade unions**, arguing that in a state run by the workers, the state itself was their 'union'. At the All Russian Conference of Trade Unions in early 1920, Trotsky explained that because labour no longer produced profits for a bourgeois employer, workers ought to be motivated to build the new socialist economy for the benefit of all. He criticised the pursuit of better pay and working conditions as petty self-interest. Accordingly, he argued that strike action should be outlawed and unpaid overtime willingly accepted. Trade unionists such as Mikhail Tomsky strongly criticised Trotsky for harming the very people the Bolsheviks claimed to represent. To them, Trotsky's scheme to militarise the labour force and ban strikes was a denial of working class solidarity. Eventually, opposition to Trotsky's attack on the unions spread, so that by 1921, even Lenin himself rejected the idea that trade unions should be state run.

The distribution of food to the cities was a critical problem made worse by the Civil War. In the first days of its existence the Bolshevik regime issued a Land Decree that divided the great estates of the Russian nobility into millions of small-scale farms. As a result, **centralised control** of agriculture became impossible. This problem was highlighted when many peasants began to hoard their grain in the hope that prices

would increase. This practice led to widespread famine particularly in the cities, as grain began to rot in silos across Russia. In response, Trotsky called on the labour armies to requisition food surpluses, by force if necessary.

Many peasants were embittered by the requisitioning of their produce, which was often carried out with violence and the destruction of their property. Soon there was a general breakdown of law and order in the countryside. Crop harvests fell dramatically as less seed was sown in order to avoid producing a surplus. Peasants who were found to have destroyed their grain surpluses were executed. Many even resorted to killing their livestock to avoid sowing a crop altogether. In the harsh winter of 1919-1920 even subsistence levels could not be achieved. A rural tragedy resulted, with an estimated five million lives lost due to famine. Widespread peasant revolts during 1920 further indicated that the Bolsheviks were beginning to lose control of the countryside.

Suppression of the Kronstadt uprising

Traditional Bolshevik supporters in the cities also resented the miserable life they had to endure under War Communism. Shockwaves were sent through the party in March 1921, when sailors at the Kronstadt naval base revolted. The sailors issued a **manifesto** demanding freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to form trade unions, an end to forced labour and the right of other socialist parties to exist.

The Kronstadt Revolt was particularly troubling for the Bolsheviks as these sailors were considered heroes of the October Revolution. Trotsky himself had developed a strong affinity with them, becoming their spokesman before the October Revolution. They even formed his bodyguard during the tense months of 1917. On the night the Bolsheviks seized power, it was Kronstadt sailors aboard the *Aurora* who carried out Trotsky's instructions to fire on the Winter Palace.

As Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs after the Civil War, Trotsky had to decide how to deal with the Kronstadt Revolt. On his orders, 50,000 Red Army troops were sent to confront 14,000 sailors in a pitched battle on the ice of the frozen Bay of Finland. When the revolt was finally suppressed, approximately 1000 sailors had been killed and another 2500 taken prisoner. Trotsky would later justify his decision by claiming that the naval base had come under the influence of a White general. He dismissed their manifesto as nothing but a list of **petty-bourgeois** demands.

Trotsky and the New Economic Policy (NEP)

The Kronstadt Revolt highlighted growing dissatisfaction with the Bolsheviks among their traditional supporters. Even within the Party itself, factions opposed to the leadership began to form. The terror tactics used to carry out War Communism had not only failed to address the economic crisis but also created a peasant revolt. Faced with the spread of this revolt to the cities due to food shortages, the Bolsheviks realised that only a return to a free market would satisfy the peasantry. Grain requisitioning therefore ceased and was replaced with taxation in kind. Produce quotas were slashed and peasants were permitted to keep the best part of their harvest to sell on the open market. In the cities, new opportunities for private wealth were created as small businesses were privatised and goods could once again be bought and sold for a profit.

The **New Economic Policy (NEP)** was officially adopted at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921. As Commissar for Transport in 1920, Trotsky had previously called for the reintroduction of a limited **free market** in the rail industry. His extensive travels during the Civil War had also given him first-hand knowledge of the social upheaval being caused by War Communism. Trotsky's proposal to introduce elements of capitalism in the rail industry was rejected by Lenin and the Central Committee in 1920. By the following year, however, Lenin could no longer ignore the crisis at hand. Strict government control over the economy had failed to improve the food supply and even their most loyal supporters had begun to turn against the Bolsheviks. To tighten their tenuous grip on power, the party had little choice but to restore free market trade.

Although there was little alternative to the NEP in 1921, leading Bolsheviks later became divided over whether or not the policy should be extended. The reintroduction of capitalism represented a major shift in direction for the Bolshevik Revolution. Instead of the classless society envisaged by Marx, a return to profiteering was seen as a backwards step to ideologues such as Trotsky. He therefore emerged as the leader of the left faction within the party that saw the NEP as an emergency measure to be dropped once the immediate economic crisis had passed. He predicted that long-term continuation of the NEP would create a new class of capitalists who would rise to threaten the Bolsheviks. Trotsky also believed that market forces would be too slow in generating the industrial growth Russia desperately needed. Underdeveloped and isolated in a hostile capitalist world, Russia's future security depended on rapid industrialisation which could only be achieved through state planning. In place of the NEP, Trotsky proposed the consolidation of millions of privately owned peasant farms

into large socialist collectives. He believed that this would allow the government to control the food supply and feed the growing labour force.

By late 1922, divisions within the party were beginning to emerge between Trotsky's left and the right faction led by Bukharin, which called for the long-term continuation of the NEP to further enrich the peasantry. Because they made up 85% of the population, the support of the peasants was considered both an economic *and* political necessity. According to Bukharin, as peasants became wealthier, their demand for farm equipment and consumer goods would fuel industrial growth in the cities. The flow of food from country to city could only be guaranteed by allowing the peasants to sell their grain surpluses for a profit.

The 'scissors crisis' and the Platform of 46

Despite supporting the NEP at the Eleventh Party Congress in 1922, by the following year Trotsky was at odds with the Central Committee over the future direction of its economic policy. Divisions between left and right factions intensified in 1923 after the emergence of a new economic problem. Trotsky used the term 'scissors crisis' to describe the widening gap between falling agricultural prices and rising industrial prices. By 1923, agriculture had recovered to the extent that an oversupply of produce flooded the market resulting in a fall of agricultural prices. At the same time, industry continued to stagnate resulting in a scarcity of manufactured goods. Faced with falling incomes and rising prices, peasants once again began to destroy surpluses.

Since May 1922, Lenin's leadership had been severely weakened due to a stroke. In his absence, a **triumvirate** comprising of Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev had formed within the **Politburo**. When the 'scissors crisis' threatened to sever the food supply to the cities, Trotsky wrote to the Politburo condemning them for their economic mismanagement. Forty-six influential party members known as the Platform of 46 joined Trotsky's call for a reappraisal of the NEP and the introduction of a **planned economy**. They argued that while the NEP had successfully addressed the economic crisis of 1921, its usefulness had run its course. Instead, the NEP now favoured the growth of a new class of profiteers known as **Nepmen**, who would sooner or later develop into an opposing class. According to Trotsky, the time had come to take control of the economy away from the Nepmen. In response to their protest, the Central Committee charged Trotsky and the Platform of 46 with breaking the ban on **factionalism** that had been introduced at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921.

GLOSSARY

War Communism: Bolshevik economic policy during the Civil War in which state control of industry and agriculture was introduced in order to feed and supply the Red Army

nationalisation: the process of government taking ownership of privately owned enterprises

labour armies: a mobile labour force that could be commanded like an army

trade union: a workers' association that seeks an improvement in working conditions

centralised control: the ability of one individual or organisation to direct the management of an organisation

manifesto: a written call to action or set of demands

petty-bourgeois: the lower middle class, that is, those who uphold the system of capitalism but derive only minor economic benefit from it

New Economic Policy (NEP): Bolshevik economic policy introduced in 1921 in which elements of capitalism were reintroduced to stimulate food production and industrial output

free market: where buyers and sellers determine prices and production output

'scissors crisis': the problem identified by Trotsky in 1923 whereby peasants were unable to purchase consumer goods because of the combined problems of falling agricultural prices and the high cost of consumer products due to poor industrial productivity

triumvirate: a leadership group of three

Politburo: the leadership sub-committee of the Central Committee

planned economy: where the government determines production targets and sets prices, rather than allowing market forces to determine supply and demand

Nepmen: a new class of traders and businessmen that emerged during the period of the New Economic Policy

factionalism: where members of an organisation split into opposing sub-groups based on different points of view

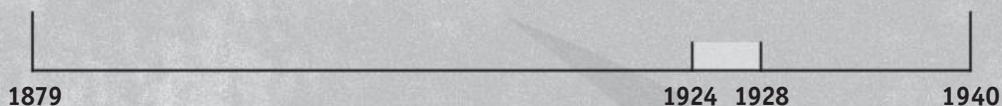
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Outline the main features of War Communism.
2. Explain why Trotsky called for the elimination of independent trade unions.
3. Outline the major effects of War Communism on the peasantry.
4. Discuss why did the Kronstadt Revolt represented a new challenge to Bolshevik authority.
5. Give reasons why the party adopted the New Economic Policy in 1921.
6. Contrast the attitudes of Trotsky and Bukharin towards the NEP in 1924.
7. Define the term 'scissors crisis'.
8. Who were the Platform of 46 and what were their demands?

CHAPTER 11:

TROTSKY IN DECLINE

(1924–1928)



Timeline

- 1924** **January:** Lenin dies. Trotsky is absent from Lenin's funeral.
- February:** Trotsky criticises the party leadership in 'The New Course' in *Pravda*.
- May:** Thirteenth Party Congress; influx of new members called the Lenin levy; Lenin's testament is suppressed.
- 1925** **January:** Trotsky is dismissed as Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs.
- December:** Fourteenth Party Congress sees the **troika** come to an end and the beginning of the United Opposition.
- 1926** **October:** Trotsky is removed from the Politburo.
- 1927** **September:** Trotsky is removed from the Executive Committee of Comintern.
- November:** Trotsky is removed from the Central Committee of the Party.
- 1928** **January:** Trotsky is charged with counter-revolutionary activity and exiled to Alma Ata.

Stalin's rise

Prior to Lenin's illness Stalin's role in the Bolshevik Party had not been distinguished. Having played only minor roles in the October Revolution and Civil War, Stalin's name was virtually unknown to the public in 1920. Despite later portraying himself as a key figure of the October Revolution, Stalin was in fact absent from the meeting at which Trotsky allocated strategic roles to those present. After the seizure of power, Lenin appointed Stalin, a native Georgian, as **Commissar for Nationalities**. In 1919, he became **Commissar for State Control** and in 1920 **Commissar for Workers and Peasants Inspection**. These were not high profile portfolios such as those Trotsky had held. However, unlike Trotsky, Stalin was careful to align himself with Lenin on practically every issue.

Relations between Trotsky and Stalin first turned sour during the Civil War. Lenin had been forced to mediate in a dispute that had arisen after Stalin refused to obey Trotsky's orders. Three years later, Stalin again angered Trotsky by carrying out an invasion of Georgia to topple its Menshevik government. Although Lenin had given his tacit approval for the invasion, Trotsky argued that it was wrong to interfere in Georgian affairs and that a revolution should not be imposed from outside. Trotsky's authority as Commissar for War had also been undermined by a deployment of Red Army forces without his approval.

The turning point in Stalin's political career came with his appointment as **General Secretary** of the Party in May 1922. This made him the only member of the Central Committee to simultaneously hold positions in the Politburo (the leadership sub-committee of the Central Committee), the Orgburo (responsible for the organisation of the party) and the Secretariat (responsible for the administration of the party). Trotsky himself had supported Stalin's appointment as General Secretary, because like most prominent party figures, he considered the position of General Secretary to be a mundane, administrative role with little political authority. This was perhaps one of Trotsky's greatest political errors, since Stalin fully exploited the position of General Secretary to exert enormous influence over the party membership. While Lenin as leader appointed Commissars to top government posts, the appointment of thousands of lower positions fell to Stalin. Many congress delegates owed their position to Stalin who could in turn manipulate party policy. Not only did he direct the organisation of the local party branches but he also determined the business of the Politburo.

After Lenin's death in January 1924, Stalin used his control of party membership to admit an influx of new members. Stalin was more than happy to approve the hundreds of thousands of applications to join the Party after the Red victory in the Civil War. These new members were referred to as the **Lenin levy** and numbered over one million. Far less educated and discriminating than the long-standing Bolsheviks, many of the new recruits were political opportunists who were willing to sing to Stalin's tune. Stalin spoke in terms they could understand, unlike Trotsky whose theoretical language alienated many of the new generation. A purge of older Bolsheviks also allowed Stalin to pack the Thirteenth Party Congress of 1924 with his own supporters. Thus, when critics of Stalin rose to speak to the congress, they were greeted with booing and jeering from the overwhelming majority of the delegates.

Old friends, new enemies

Until his illness, Lenin's authority as leader of the party had never been questioned. Although on occasions Trotsky had publicly disagreed with Lenin, this was always over principle rather than personality. Lenin clearly valued Trotsky as his most able deputy, since it was Trotsky he turned to at the most critical moments of the Revolution. In the public eye, Trotsky's reputation as both the hero and saviour of the Revolution was second only to Lenin's. The records of Politburo meetings reflected this by always listing Trotsky's name after Lenin's. While he had Lenin's ongoing support, Trotsky's stature within the party was guaranteed.

Despite his important role in the history of the party, others within the Politburo had come to resent Trotsky's arrogance and patronising manner. If an address to the Central Committee bored him, Trotsky was known to have read a novel instead. Those who had remained with Lenin since the original Bolshevik-Menshevik split in 1903, dismissed Trotsky's conversion to Bolshevism on the eve of the Revolution, as political opportunism. Most were not as willing as Lenin to forgive Trotsky for his Menshevik past, especially when Lenin had declared of Trotsky, 'There is no finer Bolshevik'. In the power vacuum created by Lenin's illness it was Trotsky therefore, who posed the greatest threat to the leadership ambitions of others. As Lenin's influence over party affairs declined, these men were presented with a golden opportunity to undermine Trotsky's political influence.

By 1923, a three-way alliance between Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev had formed against Trotsky inside the Politburo. Although Kamenev and Zinoviev had previously supported Trotsky in criticising the NEP, they were now far more concerned with the threat he posed to their leadership hopes. Known as the **troika**, the three conspired to isolate Trotsky by voting against any proposal he submitted. During Central Committee meetings, the particular issue at stake became less relevant to the troika than Trotsky's position on it. Secret meetings of the Politburo were held without Trotsky's knowledge and campaigns were conducted to drive a public wedge between Trotsky and Lenin.

In response to his growing political impotence, Trotsky used the press to address ordinary members of the party. In a series of articles written in *Pravda*, known as his '**New Course**', Trotsky claimed that the party had become a rigid bureaucracy that prohibited democratic decision-making. In May 1924 he addressed the Thirteenth Party Congress with these same concerns but also announced that he would willingly submit to any resolution passed by the congress. In what would emerge as a major

theme of his later writing, Trotsky elevated the party above those who were trying to remove him from it. Regardless of its poor leadership, Trotsky always saw the party as the only legitimate representative of the workers.

Lenin's testament

In the months before his death, Lenin expressed grave concerns about Stalin's unchecked power. During several meetings prior to his death, Lenin proposed an alliance with Trotsky to break Stalin's grip on the Party. Trotsky later claimed that in December 1922, Lenin had offered to make him Vice Premier, a position of authority second only to Lenin himself. A few days later, however, Lenin was severely incapacitated by a second stroke. During their last conversation Lenin reportedly indicated his concerns over Stalin's handling of the Georgian affair. Although he had approved the invasion of Georgia, Lenin now recanted after learning of the brutality with which Stalin had treated Georgian Bolsheviks.

Lenin's final **testament** was dictated at the end of December 1922. In it he called for the removal of Stalin as General Secretary, stating, 'Comrade Stalin, having become General Secretary, has unlimited authority concentrated in his hands, and I am not sure that he will always be capable of using that power with sufficient caution.' The following month, after Stalin had insulted Lenin's wife Krupskaya, the following postscript was added, 'Stalin is too rude and this defect, although quite tolerable in our midst...becomes intolerable in a General Secretary. That is why I suggest that the comrades think about a way of removing Stalin from the post.' Concerning Trotsky, Lenin said, 'Comrade Trotsky on the other hand is distinguished not only by his outstanding ability. He is personally perhaps the most capable man in the present Central Committee.' (*Lenin's Collected Works*, Vol. 36, p.593-611)

Well before Lenin's death, the troika had made vigorous attempts to suppress the contents of his testament. As well as his criticism of Stalin, Lenin had not forgotten Kamenev and Zinoviev's opposition to the October coup in 1917. Of the seven members of the politburo, Trotsky was the only one who stood to benefit from the publication of Lenin's testament. In fact, Lenin had explicitly stated that Trotsky's Menshevik past should be forgotten, as he had more than redeemed himself by his services to the party. The Thirteenth Party Congress in May 1924 was his best opportunity to publish the testament; however prior to the congress, the Central Committee agreed that it should be suppressed. Supporters of the troika argued that Lenin had not been in his right mind when he dictated the testament and that he had never in fact asked for it to be published. Strangely, Trotsky raised no objections perhaps because Lenin's

testament had also made veiled references to his healthy ego. The Thirteenth Party Congress was to be the first stage-managed congress where the major decisions were made before votes were cast.

The cult of Lenin

Trotsky was absent from Moscow on 21 January, 1924 when Lenin died. He had taken leave to recuperate from a recent illness and received the news of Lenin's death via a telegram from Stalin.

At once he drafted an obituary stating, 'And now Vladimir Ilyich is no more. The party is orphaned. The workmen's class is orphaned. This was the very feeling aroused by the news of the death of our teacher and leader.'

Sensing the urgent need to return to Moscow, Trotsky cabled Stalin to inquire about the date of the funeral. In reply Stalin encouraged Trotsky to continue his recuperation, claiming that he would not return to Moscow in time for the funeral the following day. When the funeral occurred five days later, Stalin's deception was exposed. Trotsky's absence had been used as evidence of a rift with Lenin. Acting as the pallbearers of the dead leader's coffin, the members of the troika completed the deception by presenting themselves as Lenin's true heirs.

Lenin's funeral was the beginning of a cult of the former leader in which he was attributed god-like status. This flew in the face of traditional Marxism, which frowned upon the elevation of one individual above everyone else. Instead of the simple burial requested by Lenin, his body was embalmed and displayed in a specially built **mausoleum** in Moscow's Red Square. Lenin's writing was cited as gospel truth and was often misquoted in the defence of almost any position. Petrograd was renamed Leningrad and statues and portraits of the former leader began to appear in town squares across the Soviet Union. The date of Lenin's death was to be commemorated as a national day of mourning. The cult of Lenin was the forerunner to the cult of the living leader, Stalin that would develop within a decade.

The United Opposition

The Fourteenth Party Congress in 1925 witnessed an intense debate over the continuation of the NEP. Stripped of his right to address the congress, Trotsky was consigned to the role of onlooker. To his amazement Zinoviev emerged as the head of a new opposition group that condemned the NEP for favouring the new wealthy class at the expense of the workers. Stalin reacted by cutting ties with his former ally, siding

instead with Bukharin who called for a long-term extension of the NEP. Trotsky, who had recently been dismissed as Commissar for War, now saw an opportunity to gather allies. During a sombre meeting between Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev, the former members of the troika regretted their poor judgment and admitted that Stalin sought nothing less than the dictatorship of the party. The former adversaries agreed to put the past behind them and unite to defeat Stalin.

For the next two years the **United Opposition** criticised the Party leadership for abandoning the principles of Leninism. They pointed out that an atmosphere of bullying had begun to dominate the party at all levels and complained that the slightest disagreement with Stalin was branded as factionalism. The United Opposition also condemned the Stalin-Bukharin bloc for alienating the working class in favour of the Nepmen and **kulaks**. As the main beneficiaries of the NEP, members of the new wealthy class had begun to fill party vacancies created by the departure of genuine communists who had dared to express their concerns. Trotsky's anger at this betrayal was no clearer than in his bitter denouncement of Stalin as the 'grave-digger' of the Revolution. For this he was removed from the Politburo in October 1926.

'Permanent revolution' versus 'Socialism in one country'

As well as attacking Trotsky's reputation Stalin also opposed the very foundation of Trotskyism – the theory of permanent revolution. For Stalin, the survival of the Soviet Union depended on healthy relations with the governments of capitalist nations. Clearly this could not be achieved if these governments felt threatened by communist **subversion** being waged by the Soviet Union. Furthermore, during the economic boom of the 1920's the chances of European revolution seemed highly improbable. As such, Stalin's policy of **Socialism in One Country** saw Soviet foreign policy retreat into isolation. This inward-focused policy was primarily concerned with protecting the interests of the Soviet Union rather than supporting revolutionary movements abroad.

Stalin's dominating attitude towards the Third Communist International (or **Comintern**) epitomized his new philosophy. Established by Lenin and Trotsky in 1919, the Comintern offered support to communist parties around the world in their collective struggle against capitalism. In many ways, the Comintern was the practical expression of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. As the world's only Communist state, it was understandable that the Soviet Union should play a leading role in the Comintern. Under Stalin, however, the Comintern became nothing more than a mouthpiece of the Soviet Union. Instead of supporting communist movements throughout the world, Stalin sided with capitalist governments when it was in the

Soviet Union's interest to do so. This occurred in 1927, when Stalin advised the Chinese Communist Party to support the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek rather than attempt to seize power. In April 1927, when Chiang Kai-shek massacred tens of thousands Chinese communists and workers in Shanghai, Stalin did nothing.

In 1927, hopes of international revolution suffered another setback after a brief war-scare with Britain. On suspicion of Soviet involvement in the general strike of 1926, the British government broke off diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union. War loomed until a frenzy of diplomatic efforts by the **Commissariat of Foreign Affairs** managed to end the crisis. The damage to the international reputation of the Soviet Union provided Stalin with the perfect pretext to remove Trotsky and other left-wing critics from the party. For Stalin, Trotsky's revolutionary foreign policy contradicted efforts to build socialism at home and in doing so, endangered the Soviet Union. As a result, Trotsky was dismissed from the Executive Committee of the Comintern in September 1927.

The final challenge

Celebrations were planned across the Soviet Union on 26 October 1927 to commemorate the ten-year anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Having failed to get their message through to the party, the United Opposition hoped to use the celebrations as a public stage for their protest. In Moscow, protesters carrying banners such as 'Carry out Lenin's testament' joined a procession to Lenin's mausoleum in Red Square. Portraits of Trotsky and Zinoviev were also to be held aloft by the supporters of the United Opposition. The protest had barely begun, however, before police arrested and beat many of the dissenters. As the scuffles became more violent, the celebrations continued to follow their mechanical script and before long, even the crowds had turned against the protesters.

Stalin could not ignore this blatant challenge to his authority. His final retribution against the United Opposition took place on 14 November. At a joint meeting of the **Central Control Commission** and the Central Committee, both Trotsky and Zinoviev were expelled from the Central Committee. Stalin's grip on the Party was complete: of the 213 votes cast, 210 voted for the expulsion of Trotsky and Zinoviev, two against (those being Trotsky and Zinoviev themselves) and there was one abstention. Four of Trotsky's key supporters were also dismissed from the Central Committee, while hundreds of Trotskyists were removed from district party branches. The charge they were all found guilty of was inciting insurrection and subversion of the government.

The defeated opposition at once split over the best course of action to take. In an effort to reconcile with Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev publicly renounced their ideas and declared their willingness to accept any resolution passed by the Party in the future. Trotsky's refusal to capitulate meant that he was once again isolated, but this time without the security of his reputation, which had now been utterly destroyed.

On 12 January, Trotsky was charged with counter-revolutionary activity. His punishment was permanent exile to Alma Ata in Kazakhstan. However, on the date set for his departure, dozens of his supporters staged a protest at Kazan train station, some even lying across the railway tracks to prevent the train departing. As a result, the date of his departure was postponed by a week. When **GPU** agents arrived several days before the set date, Trotsky, in an act of defiance, locked himself inside the house. The agents were then forced to dress and carry Trotsky to a waiting vehicle that took him to his train. Once at the train station, resistance continued as Trotsky's younger son Sergei Sedov came to blows with one of the GPU agents. Eventually Trotsky was hauled onto the train for the beginning of his one-way journey to Alma Ata.

GLOSSARY

Commissar for Nationalities:

Bolshevik minister responsible for the national minorities and territories of Soviet Russia

Commissar for State Control:

Bolshevik minister responsible for the administration of the Soviet government

Commissar for Workers and Peasants

Inspection: Bolshevik minister responsible for economic planning

General Secretary: a position within the Bolshevik party that controlled the membership and organisation of the party at a district branch level

Lenin levy: the mass enrolment of workers into the party after 1924

troika: a type of peasant cart drawn by three horses; the term was used to describe the three-way alliance between Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev within the Politburo

New Course: a series of articles written by Trotsky and published in Pravda in 1923, which called for the restoration of inner democracy to the party

testament: a document outlining someone's last will

mausoleum: a public tomb, usually grandiose in size

United Opposition: those inside the party who opposed the continuation of the New Economic Policy at the Fourteenth Party Congress

kulaks: wealthier peasants with larger tracts of land that employed poorer peasants

subversion: secretly working to undermine a government

Socialism in One Country: Stalin's theory of foreign policy that pursued positive relations with capitalist nations in order to build socialism in the Soviet Union; as a consequence the call to assist revolutionary movements abroad was rejected.

Comintern: also known as the Third International; founded in 1919 by Lenin and Trotsky to promote the worldwide spread of communist revolution by aiding its member parties

Commissariat for Foreign Affairs: the Bolshevik bureaucracy responsible for diplomatic relations with foreign powers

Central Control Commission: the agency within the Bolshevik Party responsible for party discipline and membership

GPU: Russian acronym for the State Political Directorate; formed in 1922 and grew out of the original Soviet secret police known as the Cheka

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Outline Stalin's role in the party prior to Lenin's death.
2. Explain how Stalin used the position of General Secretary to strengthen his own power.
3. Give reasons why others in the Politburo disliked Trotsky.
4. Explain why Lenin's testament remained hidden from ordinary party members.
5. Give reasons for Trotsky's absence from Lenin's funeral and explain the impact of this action.
6. Explain why Stalin created a 'cult of Lenin' after the former leader's death.
7. Why was the United Opposition formed? Explain how it revived Trotsky's political hopes.
8. Outline Trotsky's criticisms of Stalin's policy of Socialism in One Country.

TROTSKY'S STRUGGLE FOR POWER (1922–1928)

SOURCE INVESTIGATIONS

Question 1

- (a) What are the men in Source 13 doing?
- (b) Describe the mood of the men in Source 13.
- (c) According to Source 14, who were the individuals that made up the troika?
- (d) According to Source 14, why was Trotsky isolated within the Politburo?

Question 2

Use Sources 15 and 16, as well as your own knowledge, to account for Trotsky's failure to secure the leadership of the Communist Party after Lenin's death.

Question 3

To what extent are Sources 14 and 16 useful for an historian studying Trotsky's role in the power struggle against Stalin? In your answer refer to the reliability and perspective of each source.

SOURCE FILE

Source 13

Photograph of Lenin's funeral, January 1924. Leading members of the Bolshevik Central Committee acted as the pallbearers of Lenin's coffin. Stalin is the furthest left; Trotsky was absent. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.



Source 14

Everyone was on the side of Zinoviev, who flung at Trotsky: "Can't you see you're surrounded? Your tricks won't work, you're in the minority, on your own." Trotsky was enraged, and Bukharin tried to calm things down. It was often the case before a session (of the Politburo) Stalin would meet Kamenev and Zinoviev and agree a position. In the Secretariat we called these meetings of the troika the 'ring'.

Balashov, a member of Stalin's Secretariat remembers Trotsky's isolation in the Politburo. (quoted in) Lynch, M. Trotsky: the Permanent Revolutionary.

Source 15

Availing itself of the death of Lenin, the ruling group announced a 'Lenin levy'. The gates of the party, always carefully guarded, were now thrown wide open. Workers, clerks and petty officials flocked through in crowds. The political aim of this manoeuvre was to dissolve the revolutionary vanguard in raw human material, without experience, without independence, and yet with the old habit of submitting to the authorities. The scheme was successful. By freeing the bureaucracy from the control of the proletarian vanguard, the 'Lenin levy' dealt a deathblow to the party of Lenin.

Trotsky, L. *The Revolution Betrayed*.

Source 16

The views of a modern British Trotskyist and academic:

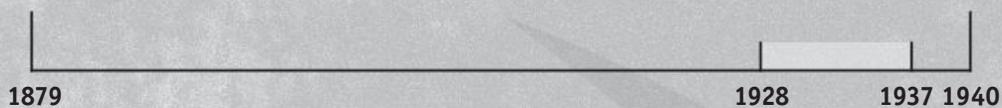
Trotsky lost to Stalin because, at the time in question the social force he represented – the working class – was weaker than the social force Stalin represented – the rising bureaucracy. There were two ways in which Trotsky could have won: through the victory of the international revolution or, possibly, through abandoning the working class to engage in an unprincipled personal power struggle – in that case he would have ceased to be Trotsky. That the first option did not materialize is Trotsky's and humanity's tragedy; that he rejected the second, despite extraordinary difficulties and pressures, is his greatness.

Molyneux, J. Web log: <http://johnmolyneux.blogspot.com/2006/09/trotsky-slandered.html>. Accessed: Sept 19, 2006.

EXTENDED RESPONSE QUESTIONS

- (a) Describe Trotsky's political strengths and weaknesses.
- (b) Evaluate the view that Trotsky was largely responsible for his own decline.

CHAPTER 12:
A PERMANENT EXILE
(1928–1937)



Timeline

- 1928** **April:** Stalin's **Left Course** marks the end of the NEP.
- 1929** **February:** Trotsky is deported from the Soviet Union to the island of Prinkipo in Turkey; launches a journal called the *Bulletin of the Opposition*.
April: Former Trotsky supporters rejoin the party at the Sixteenth Congress.
- 1930** Trotsky publishes his autobiography, *My Life*.
- 1931** Trotsky publishes the three-volume, *History of the Russian Revolution*.
- 1932** Nazis come to power in Germany; beginning of attacks on German communists.
- 1933** Trotsky moves to France.
- 1935** Trotsky moves to Norway.
- 1936** **August:** Trotsky completes writing *The Revolution Betrayed*; first Moscow show-trial.
- 1937** **January:** Trotsky moves to Mexico; youngest son, Sergei, is murdered.

A divided opposition

Life in Alma Ata was difficult for Trotsky and his wife Natalya. Trotsky contracted malaria from the swarms of mosquitoes that arrived during the scorching summers. Harsh winters brought severe dust storms that meant lengthy spells of time indoors. This allowed Trotsky to pursue his passion for writing and for the first time in a decade, he began making his livelihood outside of politics. Indeed, his exile would prove to be the most prolific writing phase of Trotsky's life. He began by writing his autobiography in an attempt to set the record straight, but he also dedicated considerable time to writing letters to other oppositionists in exile. During 1928, over a six-month period Trotsky sent over 800 letters, 500 telegrams and received more than 1700

pieces of correspondence. Stalin continued to monitor this flow of news by having GPU agents read and censor each and every piece of mail.

As the party in Moscow continued to debate the NEP, a new ray of hope emerged for the exiled opposition. Having dealt with the Left Opposition, Stalin now emerged as the leading critic of the NEP through his **Left Course**, in which he concluded that the NEP was beginning to restrict the growth of socialism. This was essentially Trotsky's position and almost overnight Stalin began sounding like a member of the **Left Opposition**, arguing that the profiteering of the kulaks

and Nepmen should cease. Likewise, Stalin adopted Trotsky's call for a program of rapid industrialisation. Trotsky was initially optimistic about Stalin's Left Course, sensing that perhaps Stalin had finally come around to his way of thinking and was ready to accept him back. As in the past, however, it was soon apparent that Stalin's position on the issue was determined by his own political ambition rather than principle.

Trotsky tried to unite the exiled opposition, but even this failed, due to the emergence of new internal divisions. Essentially, the opposition split over how to respond to Stalin's Left Course. Some believed that the Left Course was a sign that Stalin was ready to welcome the Left Opposition back and in fact, after the Sixteenth Party Congress, about 3000 of Trotsky's supporters were readmitted into the party. Despite the restrictions Stalin placed on these conciliators, many saw involvement within the party as a better option than attacking it from without. Trotsky refused to believe that Stalin's shift to the left was genuine and stated that he would only be prepared to return to Moscow if open and democratic debate were permitted.

Of the few oppositionists remaining in exile, many called for the formation of a new party based on the principles of **Leninism**. Until Lenin's illness, democratic decision-



Trotsky with wife Natalya and eldest son Lev in Alma Ata. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

making and support of the international proletariat had been major features of the party. However, Trotsky flatly rejected any call for a new party. He maintained that, despite its flaws, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union ran the only workers' state in the world and as such, it should not be challenged. Trotsky maintained that eventually the Russian workers would reject Stalin's deviation and turn to the oppositionists, but that this would occur only if they could hold firm. Trotsky believed that one day, even he would be recalled, simply because the party could not do without him.

Foreign exile

These illusions were shattered when Trotsky was informed that he was to be permanently transported from the Soviet Union. The sheer volume of mail he had sent from Alma Ata was proof enough that he could not be silenced. Because Stalin was not yet prepared to execute or imprison him, the next best solution was to have Trotsky physically removed from the Soviet Union. At the same time, Stalin embarked on a public propaganda campaign to portray Trotsky as a dangerous counter-revolutionary.

Understandably, most countries were reluctant to give residence to an advocate of international revolution. Fearful that he would become a target of retribution for former generals of the White Army, Trotsky saw his deportation by Stalin as a way of having others kill him. When he was first told of his exile from the Soviet Union on January 20, 1929, he protested by going on a hunger strike until told of his final destination. On 7 February 1929 he was finally informed that he would be sent to Turkey. The following month he was stripped of his Soviet citizenship and passport, ensuring that he would never return to the Soviet Union.

Once in Turkey, Trotsky lost little time using the Western press to criticise Stalin. He renewed his career as a journalist through paid contributions to the *New York Times* and Britain's *Daily Express*. The release of his autobiography, *My Life*, in 1930 also gave him the platform to dismantle the lies used by Stalin to oust him from the Party.

On the rise of Nazism

The **Great Depression** of the early 1930's caused an upheaval in international relations that would have major repercussions for the Soviet Union. After the Wall Street Crash of 1929, it appeared that Trotsky's bold prediction of the collapse of Western capitalism was in fact coming true. These claims had seemed misplaced during the economic boom of the previous decade. With the onset of the Great Depression, however, Trotsky's credibility as a theorist was restored.

As uncertainty gripped the West, Trotsky also warned of the growing threat of **fascism**. In Germany, which had suffered more than any other nation during the Great Depression, the rise of the **Nazi Party** marked a new assault on German communism. In the German elections of September 1930, the Nazi Party had risen from relative obscurity to win over 18% of the vote, making them the second largest party in the German **Reichstag**. According to Trotsky, Hitler owed his electoral success to the inability of the German **left-wing** parties to unite against him and once in power he sought to utterly destroy communism in Germany.

Major divisions among the German left were a direct result of the Comintern's reaction to the world crisis of the Great Depression. Believing that capitalism was on the brink of collapse, the Comintern sensed that the opportunity for world revolution was finally at hand. It therefore instructed communists throughout Europe to abandon their alliances with moderate left-wing parties, such as the Social Democrats. According to this line of thinking, the overthrow of capitalism could only occur by revolution, which communists alone advocated. Alliances with moderate socialists such as the German Social Democrats were therefore prohibited.

In contrast, Trotsky urged German communists to form a **popular front** with the Social Democrats against the rising tide of Nazism. This advice went unheeded and in 1932 the split between the parties of the German left, allowed the Nazis to come to power democratically. According to Trotsky, Hitler's rise was aided by the passivity of the German Communist Party, whose lack of action was due to advice from Moscow. Despite the fact that the German Communist Party and the Social Democrats had over 12 million members at their combined disposal, Hitler was able to boast that he had come to power unopposed. Trotsky blamed the weak surrender of the German left on the Comintern, which had become a puppet of Stalinism.

The Revolution betrayed

After four years on the Turkish island of Prinkipo, Trotsky felt cut off from European affairs. During this period he had written his autobiography and the three-volume *History of the Russian Revolution*. He had also launched a new journal called the *Bulletin of the Opposition*, which drew contributions from a number of leading socialists in Europe. Although Prinkipo had given him protection in isolation, Trotsky began making requests of various European governments for residency. In July 1933, he and his wife Sedova were finally permitted to settle in France and it was here that he began writing his most damning critique of Stalinism in *The Revolution Betrayed*.

The publication of this book in 1936 coincided with the infamous Moscow **show trials** in which leading Bolsheviks such as Kamenev, Zinoviev, Bukharin and Rykov were prosecuted for crimes against the Soviet state. These highly staged spectacles of Stalinist propaganda were nothing more than a facade of the legal process. Confessions were obtained through violent interrogation and threats against the families of the accused. Almost all of the signed confessions, admitted to taking some part of in elaborate Trotskyist conspiracies to assassinate Stalin. Worldwide interest in Trotsky at this time therefore drew a huge audience of readers for *The Revolution Betrayed*.

In the book, Trotsky condemned the **bureaucracy** that had engulfed the party and turned it into a new ruling class. According to Trotsky, the privileges enjoyed by this new political caste, which he estimated made up between 12 and 15% of the population, made it inherently **conservative**. The ruling **clique** under Stalin lived in palatial accommodation, enjoyed regular holidays, ate the finest imported foods and had access to scarce consumer goods. This was while workers and peasants starved. Instead of governing for the workers, this new class of party bureaucrats governed to protect their own self-interest. This made a mockery of Stalin's claim that socialism had finally been achieved in Russia with the introduction of his 1936 **constitution**.

The Revolution Betrayed also condemned many other facets of the Stalinist regime. The removal of many of the progressive social reforms introduced by the Bolsheviks in 1917 marked a new era of conservatism. As part of Stalin's **great retreat** to traditional values, women no longer had the right to an abortion or a divorce. Similarly, while the Bolsheviks had done much to remove religious superstition after the October revolution, the **cult of personality** replaced the once venerated Tsar with Stalin. Instead of the emergence of a classless society, Stalin had replaced one form of exploitation with another. Marx had not considered this possibility in his prediction about society after the fall of capitalism. However, living on the other side of the proletarian revolution from Marx, Trotsky could see the need for a second workers' revolution. According to Trotsky, the new ruling class of party officials and **sycophants** should be dispossessed and the revolution returned to its path of equality.

Trotsky the scapegoat

Even before it was published, extracts of *The Revolution Betrayed* had come into Stalin's possession. Having failed to silence him thus far, Stalin grew more and more paranoid about Trotsky's influence. Soon all so-called enemies became tarred with the brush of Trotskyism. During the Moscow show trials, Trotsky therefore emerged as the absent defendant in every case. In the 'trial of seventeen' the defendants were even accused

of secretly supporting Trotsky's program to restore capitalism in the Soviet Union. In the context of the show trials, the more elaborate the confession, the more likely it was that the public would believe it. The use of torture and threats ensured that confessions were extracted for the most fanciful crimes. For example, during Zinoviev's trial he was coerced into admitting, '... my defective Bolshevism became transformed into anti-Bolshevism, and through Trotskyism, I arrived at Fascism. Trotskyism is a variety of Fascism, and Zinovievism is a variety of Trotskyism.'



Stalinist Anti-Trotsky propaganda poster. The message translates to 'The possessed dog of Fascism – the Trotskyist beast' (the beast has the heads of Trotsky and Bukharin). Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

Stalin's paranoia was obvious when he spoke before a **plenum** of the Central Committee in early 1937 to investigate the degree of Trotsky's influence. During his speech to the plenum, Stalin made reference to 'Trotskyist wreckers and spies', 'the Japano-German agents of Trotskyism', 'Trotskyist double-dealers' and 'Trotskyist sabotage'. Soon the accusation of being a Trotskyite was itself sufficient grounds for arrest. As insurance against being accused themselves, members of the Central Committee joined the witch hunt against the so-called Trotskyists. Kaganovich the Commissar for Transport, for example, reported that 2019 people within the transport industry had been unmasked as being part of the Trotskyist **bloc**.

These events were just a prelude to the grand inquisition of Trotskyites held in March 1938. Stalin used the trial of members of the so-called Right-Trotskyist bloc to thoroughly discredit Trotsky's reputation. Ironically, this trial was used by Stalin to remove members of the Party's right wing, the very faction Trotsky had most often opposed. Bukharin, the leader of the right was one of twenty-one defendants said to be part of a cell involved in spying, terrorism and sabotage. The indictments of the guilty contained the mention of Trotsky's name no fewer than fifty times.

The Moscow Trials marked the beginning of Stalin's **great terror** in which an estimated 700,000 Soviet citizens were executed and 1.2 million were sent to labour camps, or **gulags** across the Soviet Union. One can only speculate at the high proportion of these men and women who were accused of some Trotskyite crime against the state. For Trotsky, the saddest outcome of this episode was the assassination of his youngest son Sergei in January 1937.



GLOSSARY

Left Course: Stalin's abandonment of the New Economic Policy and the beginning of his pursuit of communist ideology

Left Opposition: those who opposed Stalin for his continued support of the New Economic Policy and his focus on 'socialism in one country'

Leninism: Lenin's interpretation of Marxism as applied to Russia. The principles of Leninism included a party of committed revolutionaries that made its decisions democratically

Great Depression: the period of economic collapse throughout the west in the early 1930's; it was characterised by business closures and high rates of unemployment

fascism: an ideology that places the state or nation above all individual or class interests; fascists were therefore often strongly anti-communist

Nazi Party: a fascist political party that came to government in Germany in 1932

Reichstag: the German parliament

left-wing: a section of a party or parliament that espouses socialist principles, such as the redistribution of wealth, state ownership of production and the nationalisation of banks

popular-front: a coalition between radical and moderate socialist parties throughout Europe to oppose the rise of Nazism during the early 1930's

show trials: staged court trials in Moscow from 1936-38 in which the accused publicly confessed to their involvement in attempts to undermine the Soviet republic

bureaucracy: a system of organisation with a complex hierarchy of positions that are filled by appointment rather than election

clique: small exclusive group of associates

conservative: resisting change or wanting a return to former ways

constitution: the legal basis of government that determines how political power is administered

great retreat: Stalin's conservative reaction against the social reforms made immediately after the October Revolution. This mainly impacted on women, who under Stalin, returned to their traditional gender roles.

cult of personality: widespread and excessive adulation of a living leader

sycophant: someone who tries to please a more powerful person in order to gain personal advantage

plenum: a specially convened meeting of a particular committee or group

bloc: a group united by a common goal or enemy

great terror: the political repression of supposed 'enemies of the people' by Stalin during the late 1930's. This campaign targeted the party itself, Russian industry, ethnic minorities and the Red Army.

gulag: Russian acronym for Chief Administration for Corrective Labour Camps; the camps themselves came to be known as gulags.

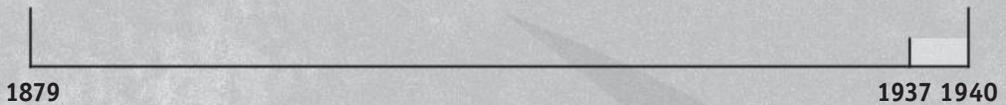
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain how Stalin's Left Course provided hope to many in the exiled opposition.
2. Give reasons why Trotsky rejected calls to form a new political party.
3. Explain why Trotsky was eventually exiled from the Soviet Union.
4. Explain how Trotsky interpreted the Great Depression of the 1930's.
5. Outline the criticisms Trotsky made of the Comintern during this period.
6. Outline the accusations Trotsky made against Stalin in *The Revolution Betrayed*.
7. Describe how the Moscow show trials became an attack on Trotsky himself.

CHAPTER 13:

THE FINAL YEARS

(1937–1940)



Timeline

- 1937 April:** The Dewey Commission finds Trotsky not guilty.
- 1938 February:** Death of Trotsky's eldest son Lev
- March:** Trial and execution of members of the Right-Trotskyist bloc in Moscow
- 1939 August:** Hitler and Stalin sign the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.
- September:** Founding congress of the Fourth International; start of World War 2
- 1940 February:** Trotsky writes his last testament.
- May:** First and unsuccessful attempt on Trotsky's life
- August:** Trotsky is murdered by Ramon Mercader.

The Dewey Commission

By 1937 Trotsky was living in Mexico after being deported from Norway. Western governments had grown nervous about Trotsky's influence in their countries. After all, wasn't he the self-proclaimed prophet of international revolution? How could they be sure he wasn't actively plotting against them?

Prior to his arrival in Mexico, Trotsky had written numerous pieces in an attempt to clear his name of the charges brought against him during the Moscow show trials. However, only a bona fide legal hearing would provide an impartial verdict of his innocence or guilt. He therefore asked his American supporters to organise a **counter-trial**. Operating outside the Soviet Union, such a counter-trial could check important dates and admit evidence that had not seen the light of day during the Moscow Trials. The American Committee for the Defence of Leon Trotsky attracted John Dewey, the renowned educational philosopher, to preside over the hearing. As a liberal in the American tradition, Dewey was in many respects Trotsky's philosophical opponent and Trotsky was not even certain that he would be impartial. However, Dewey's involvement gave the counter-trial the moral credibility that had been lacking from the Moscow Trials.

The Commission opened on 10 April 1937 with Dewey's declaration that 'no man should be condemned without a chance to defend himself'. Since Trotsky was unable to enter America due to visa restrictions, Dewey went to Mexico. The proceedings lasted a week and Trotsky was thoroughly cross-examined on every charge laid against him by the Soviet state. He answered every question put to him with candidness and detail, enduring over thirteen sessions of hearings. His concluding statement to the commission on 17 April



Trotsky at the Dewey Commission. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

lasted for over an hour. Delivered in English, which was one of his less fluent languages, Trotsky gave an impassioned plea of his innocence. He declared that if the Commission found him guilty of just one of the charges made during the Moscow Trials, he would voluntarily submit to the GPU for execution. During his final plea, he even touched on the death of his son, Sergei. He produced solid alibis for each occasion he had allegedly met with co-conspirators and proved that a hotel, where one such meeting was said to have occurred, had in fact been demolished prior to the date of the meeting. The only evidence Stalin's prosecutors managed to produce during the Moscow Trials had been the testimony of the accused, which was highly flawed. At the end of Trotsky's address, Dewey simply concluded, '... anything I can say will be an anti-climax'. When the Commission announced its verdict on 13 December 1937, it found that the Moscow Trials were invalid by all legal standards and that Trotsky was innocent of all charges.

The Fourth International

Throughout his exile, Trotsky saw the Comintern reduced to a puppet of Stalinism. Trotsky had written the Comintern manifesto in 1919 calling on communist parties around the world to join the international revolution. However, Stalin's pursuit of socialism in one country gradually destroyed this vision. When the 1935 Comintern

congress voted to formally abandon its founding vision, Trotsky was livid since this was a rejection of much he had dedicated his life to. He declared that the time had come for a new International to be established – one committed to the vision of permanent revolution and free of Moscow's control. The **Fourth International** therefore became synonymous with Trotskyism as it attracted those who believed that under Stalin, the Soviet Union had become a degenerate workers' state that was no longer fit to lead the international revolution.

The first congress of the Fourth International was held in Paris in 1938. This was six months after the assassination of Trotsky's elder son, Lev Sedov, who in death was made the honorary president. The opening congress was comprised of 21 delegates from 11 countries but lasted for only one day due to suspicions of infiltration by Stalin's GPU agents. In that short time, Trotsky's Transitional Program formed the basis of the founding principles of the Fourth International. This essentially called for the final overthrow of capitalism and criticised moderate socialists for being content merely to reform it. Trotsky maintained that the world situation was now right for revolution, despite the fact that most workers throughout the world still lacked a revolutionary consciousness. His program therefore hoped to radicalise the workers of the world by outlining a set of demands they could all unite behind. Some of these included: the right to employment, a minimum wage, automatic wage rises in line with inflation, the refusal to fight in imperialist wars and increased opportunities for women.

The establishment of the Fourth International coincided with events that triggered World War Two. Trotsky rejected the policy of **appeasement** adopted by the governments of Britain and France at the Munich Conference in September 1938. Despite the claims of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain that he had secured 'peace in our time', Trotsky predicted that war was around the corner. Within a year Stalin had signed the **Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact** with Hitler, which to Trotsky was tantamount to dealing with the devil. He explained, however, that the Nazi-Soviet Pact was no surprise since Stalinism was a form of fascism and that Hitler and Stalin in fact shared much in common.

The First World War had swept aside many of the old monarchies of Europe and with another war looming Trotsky saw new opportunities for revolution. The Comintern's demise meant that the Fourth International stood alone as the sole sponsor of world revolution and the spread of communism. Perhaps this is why Trotsky described its founding as the greatest achievement of his political career. Despite his great hopes, however, the Fourth international never fully lived up to his expectations.

Support was difficult to gather since the world's largest communist parties were financially dependent on the **USSR**. His supporters in the Soviet Union had long since been eliminated and the Nazis were driving communists in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia underground. The only support Trotsky could manage to attract was smaller groups of sympathisers, mainly from the USA.

Stalin's net tightens

Since 1933 an NKVD **mole** named Mark Zborowski had infiltrated Trotsky's inner-circle. Known as Etienne or Mack, Zborowski gradually earned the trust of Trotsky's son, Lev, and eventually became his personal assistant. Because Lev was in charge of his father's French affairs, Etienne had unrestricted access to his mail and many of Trotsky's most confidential documents. Although Lev suspected that an outsider had infiltrated their network, Etienne was never suspected. The final betrayal came in February 1938 after Lev suffered an attack of acute appendicitis. Etienne insisted he get treatment in a private clinic run by Russian doctors instead of at a French hospital. Despite checking in as a Frenchman under the name of Monsieur Martin, Lev died in mysterious circumstances several days after his operation. Evidence suggests he was poisoned, although this was never confirmed. No doubt Stalin was delighted when Tulip (the **NKVD** codename for Zborowski) was appointed to replace Lev as the leading Trotskyist in France.

By 1938, Stalin's great terror had claimed most of Trotsky's closest relatives. His younger son, Sergei, had been found guilty during the Moscow trials of 1937 and was executed shortly afterwards. His elder son, Lev, died in a Paris hospital in 1938, most likely poisoned by GPU agents. In the same year, his first wife Alexandra Sokolovskaya was tried in Russia and was also executed. By 1940, the year of his own death, his eldest brother, Alexander, and youngest sister, Olga, were also killed. As well as family members, hundreds of close associates were also eliminated.

At the beginning of 1940 Trotsky sensed his impending death and decided to draft his last testament. He had outlived every other member of Lenin's original 1917 Central Committee but although his foreign exile had extended his life, it could not guarantee his protection indefinitely. Since deriding Stalin in *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky had continued his attacks in the *Bulletin of Opposition*, particularly condemning Stalin for his purge of the Red Army on the eve of war. The fact he was in the process of writing a biography of Stalin may have also precipitated Stalin's orders to finally have him killed.

Silenced

The first attempt on Trotsky's life took place in the early hours of 24 May, 1940. Trotsky was awoken at 4:00am by machine-gun fire, which he initially mistook for Mexican fireworks. His wife Natalya had the presence of mind to push him to the floor where she shielded his body in the corner of the bedroom. A petrol bomb was thrown into the room of Trotsky's grandson, Seva, in an attempt to destroy Trotsky's archives. During the twenty minute raid, the house was riddled with bullets. At the end of the mayhem, the only casualty was one of Trotsky's bodyguards who was kidnapped and later killed by the assailants.

Because Trotsky refused to go into hiding, major efforts were made to increase the security of the house. His miraculous escape gave him the opportunity to inform the world of Stalin's murderous intentions in an article entitled 'Stalin Seeks My Death' published in June 1940. It later emerged that Stalin had flown into a rage on learning of the failed assassination attempt and ordered the arrest of the agents responsible for the fiasco.

Trotsky actually met his assassin several days after the first attempt on his life. Trotsky's introduction to Ramon Mercader occurred several months after Mercader had begun dating one of Trotsky's American secretaries, Sylvia Agelof. On 28 May, Trotsky had breakfast with Mercader and Alfred and Maugerite Rosmer, close supporters of his, who became acquainted with Mercader, alias Frank Jacson, as he waited outside Trotsky's compound for Sylvia to finish work each day. On July 20, he and Sylvia were invited by Trotsky and Natalya to have dinner at the house. As part of his cover, Mercader had shunned talk of politics with Sylvia but upon finally meeting Trotsky began taking great interest in his ideas. After a few more incidental meetings, Mercader visited Trotsky on 17 August to ask him to read over an article he had written. Trotsky later reflected, as he lay dying, that on this occasion he thought it odd that Mercader had worn a dark suit and carried a raincoat on a clear day. This had been Mercader's dress rehearsal for the assassination, which took place three days later on 20 August 1940.

On the fateful day, Mercader paid his last call wearing the dark suit and carrying his raincoat. Trotsky even commented on the inappropriateness of his attire on such a hot day. He then told Trotsky that he had finished his article and would like him to read it. As soon as Trotsky sat to read the article, Mercader struck Trotsky in the head with the mountaineer's ice pick concealed beneath his raincoat. Trotsky let out a piercing cry then charged at Mercader and bit him on the hand. This was enough to stall Mercader's escape and he was set upon by Trotsky's bodyguards and eventually handed over to the local Mexican police.

Despite the crushing blow to his skull, Trotsky did not die instantly. This would take another twenty-six hours during which time an operation was performed in a last ditch effort to save his life. Prior to falling into a coma two hours after the attack, Trotsky had sufficient presence of mind to ask Natalya to undress him for the operation. She then kissed his lips and he responded. After an unsuccessful operation, however, doctors informed Natalya that her husband had passed away at 7:35pm. The date was 21 August 1940. Trotsky was sixty years old.



Trotsky on his death bed. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

GLOSSARY

counter-trial: an attempt to reverse the judgement of a previous court trial

Fourth International: organisation founded by Trotsky that aimed to foster the spread of communist revolution around the world; comprised of communist parties not aligned to the Soviet Union

appeasement: the foreign policy adopted by Britain and France in response to Hitler's growing demands in the late 1930's. British and French leaders saw Hitler's demands as reasonable and believed he would cease to be a threat once satisfied.

Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact: the agreement signed between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in 1939 where both agreed not to attack the other. Both gave their consent to allow the other to annex different parts of Poland

mole: an undercover spy

USSR: acronym for United Soviet Socialist Republic. The name given to Communist Russia and the territories under its control

NKVD: Russian acronym for People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs. The organisation responsible for conducting foreign intelligence and special overseas operations

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain the purpose of the Dewey Commission.
2. Give reasons why Trotsky founded the Fourth International.
3. Discuss the accuracy of Trotsky's observations about events prior to the outbreak of World War Two.
4. Outline the reasons that prompted Stalin to finally have Trotsky killed.
5. Explain how Stalin's agents initially infiltrated Trotsky's inner-circle.
6. Explain how Trotsky responded to the first assassination attempt on him.
7. Outline how Ramon Mercader came to meet Trotsky.

TROTSKY'S LAST EXILE

SOURCE INVESTIGATIONS

Question 1

- (a) How has Source 17 been altered?
- (b) Explain why Source 17 was altered.
- (c) State TWO techniques used by the artist in Source 18 to portray a negative image of Trotsky.

Question 2

Using Sources 19 and 20, as well as your own knowledge, explain why Trotsky was seen as a threat to the Soviet Union during his last exile (1929-1940).

Question 3

To what extent are Sources 18 and 20 useful for an historian studying Trotsky's career in exile? In your answer refer to the reliability and perspective of each source.

SOURCE FILE

Source 17

Soviet re-touching experts in the 1930's removed Trotsky's image from this photograph. In the original, which can be seen on page 69, Trotsky is standing to the right of Lenin where the gap now appears. Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.



Source 18



A caricature of Trotsky by the Soviet artist Victor Deni, produced in the late 1930's when Trotsky wrote for Britain's *Daily Express*.

Reproduced courtesy of the David King Collection.

Source 19

'The Moscow trials, which so shocked the world, signify the death agony of Stalinism. A political regime constrained to use such methods is doomed. Depending upon external and internal circumstances, this agony may endure for a longer or shorter period of time. But no power in the world can any longer save Stalin and his system. The Soviet regime will either rid itself of the bureaucratic shell or be sucked into the abyss.'

Trotsky, L. *The Stalin School of Falsification*. Trotsky Internet Archive.

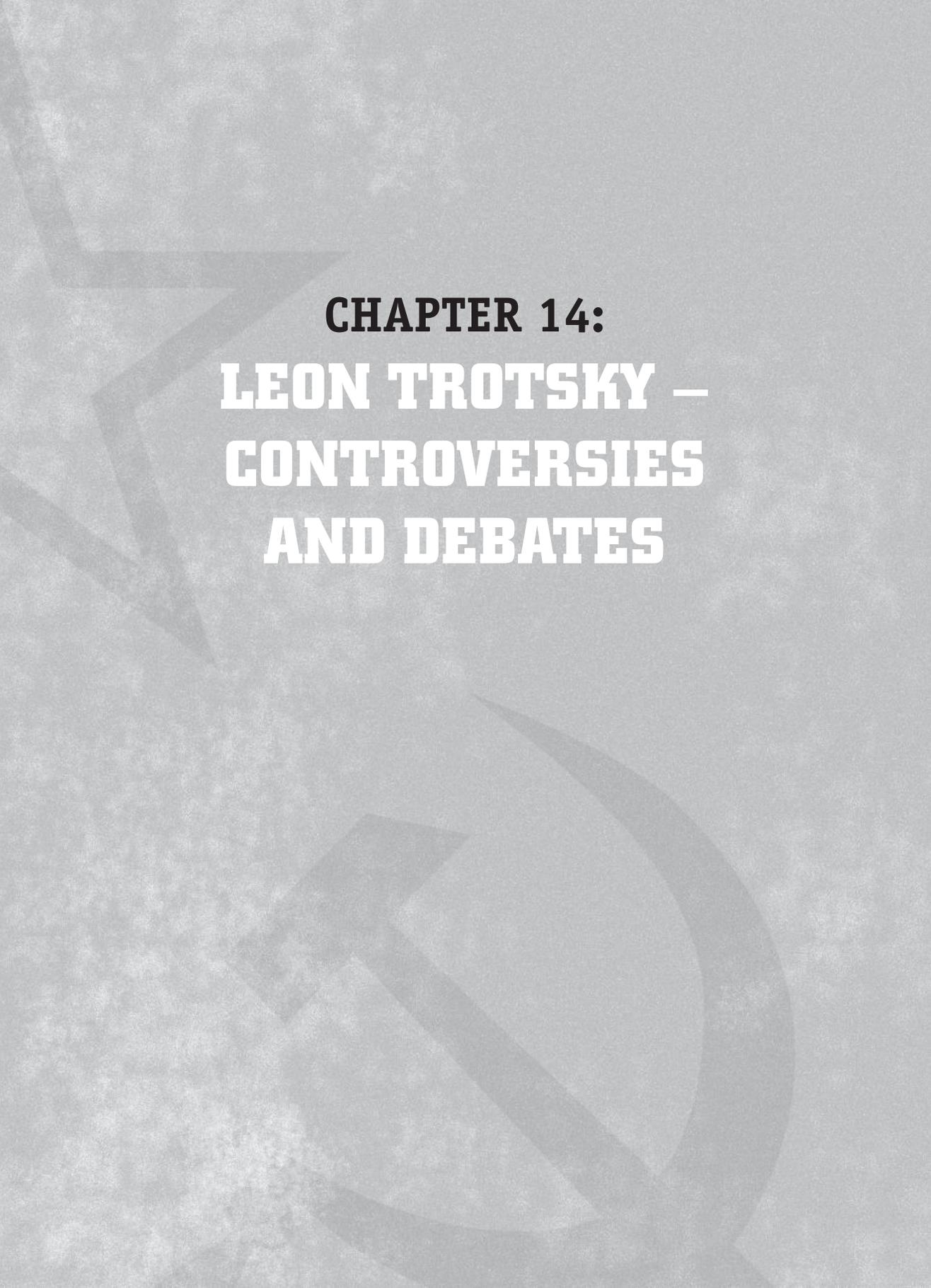
Source 20

'The Fourth International, already today, is deservedly hated by the Stalinists, Social Democrats, bourgeois liberals and fascists... It uncompromisingly gives battle to all political groupings tied to the apron-strings of the bourgeoisie. Its task: the abolition of capitalism's domination. Its aim: socialism. Its method: the proletarian revolution... The present crisis in human culture is the crisis in the proletarian leadership. The advanced workers, united in the Fourth International, show their class the way out of the crisis. They offer a program based on international experience in the struggle of the proletariat and of all the oppressed of the world for liberation. They offer a spotless banner. Workers: men and women of all countries, place yourselves under the banner of the Fourth International. It is the banner of your approaching victory!'

Trotsky, L. *Transitional Program of the Fourth International*.

EXTENDED RESPONSE QUESTIONS

- Outline the main experiences of Leon Trotsky's life in exile from 1929–1940.
- To what extent did Trotsky offer a different vision for the Soviet Union whilst in exile?



CHAPTER 14:
LEON TROTSKY –
CONTROVERSIES
AND DEBATES

Historical interpretations of Leon Trotsky

Today's modern historian is faced with a variety of historical perspectives on Leon Trotsky. His strong character seemed to draw equally strong reactions, such as the American diplomat in 1917 who concluded that Trotsky was 'a son of a bitch, but the greatest Jew since Jesus Christ'.

Even in death, Leon Trotsky continued to divide opinion. On the one hand, Soviet historians of the Stalinist era portrayed him as the wrecker of socialism and the **saboteur** of the Soviet state. On the other hand, there are those today who still cling to **Trotskyism** as the definitive proof that Marxism is inherently good. Trotskyists see in Trotskyism a version of communism that would have worked if given the chance.

Even before Trotsky's dismissal from the Communist Party in 1928, historical debate arose over his role in early Soviet history and the significance of his career. Trotsky's biographers were rarely dispassionate regarding their subject, making a balanced view of him difficult. Apart from Trotsky's own extensive writings on his life, interpretations of him can generally be categorised as following:

-  Contemporary supporters of Trotsky
(e.g. Isaac Deutscher, Max Eastman, Victor Serge)
-  Soviet historians during the Stalinist era
(e.g. E. Yaroslavsky)
-  Western historians of the Cold War era
(e.g. Robert Conquest, Leonard Shapiro)
-  Western historians of the post-Cold War era
(e.g. Richard Pipes, Geoffrey Swain)
-  Russian post-Soviet historians
(e.g. Dmitri Volkogonov)
-  Modern Trotskyists
(e.g. Alan Woods)

In order to arrive at a balanced historical view of Leon Trotsky, it is therefore necessary to examine the major themes of his life and the various debates that have developed among historians.

1. Was Trotsky a revolutionary hero or a political opportunist?

During the Stalinist era, the history of the October Revolution was re-written so that Trotsky was presented as either a cynical opportunist or simply ignored altogether. Retouching experts were employed to air-brush Trotsky out of photographs in which he appeared alongside Lenin. Under Stalin, the Soviet Union became an insular society that was closed to the western world. Information was controlled by the Soviet state, which under Stalin bred a culture of fear and submission. Debate was silenced and education replaced with **indoctrination**. Only one version of Soviet history was permitted and that history portrayed Trotsky as the enemy of the Bolshevik party.

However, at the time of his exile in 1928, most Soviet citizens accepted Trotsky's significance in the October Revolution. As a master orator, author, journalist and propagandist of the previous two decades, thousands of workers and citizens had been direct witnesses to his talent and single-minded dedication to the revolution. Stalinist historians during the late 1920's therefore had the dubious task of re-writing the history of the Russian Revolution, so that Trotsky's role was considerably diminished. They sought to convince the Soviet public that its collective memory of relatively recent events was in fact wrong. Most 'historians' during the Stalinist era, such as E. Yaroslavsky, were party **apparatchiks** who had risen to positions of authority due to their patronage of Stalin. Yaroslavsky himself was a key member of the Central Committee in the late 1920's and his history of the revolution was as self-serving as it was flawed.

As well as writing Trotsky out of early Soviet history, Yaroslavsky had the difficult assignment of magnifying Stalin's small role in the major events of the party's history. This required feats of imagination that today relegate Yaroslavsky to the ranks of propagandist rather than historian. Nevertheless, Yaroslavsky's *Short Course on the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, originally published in the late 1920's, was a mandatory textbook in Soviet high schools and was considered the final word on the Bolshevik revolution during the Stalinist era. As in all other walks of life, students soon learned not to question the official version of history if they hoped to make progress. In its original version, the *Short Course* portrayed Trotsky as an opportunist who used the Bolshevik party for his own political gain. According to this history of the revolution, Trotsky was the arch-schemer whose skills of deception made it difficult for ordinary people to know his true intentions.

By the late 1930's, however, even Yaroslavsky's history had to be re-written as it failed to extol Stalin highly enough. Stalin's cult of personality required that the

Short Course be edited to elevate Stalin to the status of a demigod. This was a task Stalin was able to personally undertake as the public memory of the actual events of the revolution had been all but forgotten. Yaroslavsky's original edition of the *Short Course* was banned due to the number of supposed heresies it was found to contain, not the least of which was mentioning Trotsky's name in association with the revolution. In the revised 1939 edition, Stalin's is given the credit for personally directing the October insurrection. In reality, he was inexplicably absent from the Central Committee meeting on the morning of the coup.

The 1939 edition of the *Short Course* went beyond merely criticising Trotsky to demonising him. Instead of being motivated by political opportunism, Trotsky, it was claimed, really sought to destroy the party from within. The revised edition accused Trotsky and his supporters of actually opposing the Bolshevik insurrection because revolution had not yet come to the rest of Europe. According to the 1939 *Short Course* (p. 224), 'The Bolsheviks defeated the attempts of the capitulators within the Party – Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Bukharin, Trotsky and Pyatakov, to deflect the Party from the path of Socialist revolution.' Similarly, in ranking the leading Bolsheviks who helped the Reds win the Civil War, Lenin's name comes first, followed by Stalin's. Trotsky's name does not appear once in the entire chapter on the Civil War. This is a remarkable omission given that he was both Commissar for War and Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Council.

Most historians today acknowledge the significance of Trotsky's role in the Bolshevik insurrection and the Civil War that followed. Western critics such as Richard Pipes do not dispute his importance in early Soviet history. Likewise, few if any historians seriously question Trotsky's motives for joining the Bolsheviks simply because, from the moment he joined, his actions, writings and speeches all demonstrated a single-minded dedication to the revolution. If he was at all intent on 'deflecting the Party from the path of Socialist revolution', his actions in 1917 were highly counter-productive to this aim. In fact, the timing of his entry into the party could not have been worse since it occurred during the July Days when the future of the party looked bleak. What's more, his identification with the Bolsheviks in July 1917 even resulted in his arrest.

2. Was Trotsky a class warrior or a fanatical ideologue?

The post-Soviet Russian historian Dmitri Volkogonov wrote critical biographies of Trotsky, Lenin and Stalin that sought to show the similarities between the views and actions of all three. In his book on Trotsky, he points out numerous instances where Trotsky resorted to terror and repression to achieve his aims. This view portrays Trotsky as a fanatical **ideologue** for whom the end justified the means. According to Volkogonov, Trotsky's obsession with class warfare saw him act with brutal callousness during the Civil War. His use of blocking units against his own troops and the use of the Cheka to terrorise the peasantry during the Civil War are cited as evidence that Trotsky was really no different from Stalin. By threatening to murder the family members of former Tsarist officers Trotsky demonstrated his willingness to adopt the most violent methods. According to Volkogonov (p.474), 'Trotskyism can only be understood by taking into account its unshakable belief in class postulates, the highest justification for revolutionary violence and its faith in the inevitability of a world Communist future'.

Nevertheless, in his autobiography Trotsky denied charges that he had terrorised men into fighting for the Red Army. According to Trotsky, '...the strongest cement in the new army was the ideas of the October revolution, and the train supplied the front with this cement.' (Trotsky, *L. My Life*, p.323). He defended his use of blocking units by reference to the high rate of desertion among Red Army troops. Fighting to defend the revolution that he had dedicated his life to, Trotsky was determined that a war-weary peasantry would not capitulate before the enemy. It should be pointed out that the Whites used similar tactics and much was made of White army atrocities in Bolshevik propaganda material during the Civil War.

Trotsky's reputation as one of the most uncompromising and hardline members of the Central Committee was, however, justified. The violent suppression of the Kronstadt uprising shows that he even resorted to the use of violence to crush internal opposition. The loyalty shown by the Kronstadt sailors during the October Revolution was instantly forgotten once they began to express their discontent with the Bolsheviks in power. While the use of terror tactics during the Civil War could be justified in terms of crushing class opposition to the revolution, the sailors of the Kronstadt naval base were working class men who had been the most fervent supporters of the Bolshevik revolution. Trotsky's role in the dealing with the Kronstadt uprising was therefore a notable blight on his career but one that he felt no need in justifying at the time he wrote his autobiography. Later he would defend his actions by claiming that the Kronstadt sailors had defected to the Whites and that their demands were nothing but **petty bourgeois** grievances.

3. Was Trotsky a legitimate critic of Stalinism or a bitter political loser?

What if Trotsky had become leader of the Soviet Union after Lenin's death? Would history have been any different? Biographers of Trotsky cannot avoid these questions and some Western critics believe that his revolutionary obsession would have produced similar results in the Soviet Union to those of Stalin.

During Trotsky's exile many Western commentators were not prepared to listen to his criticism of Stalin. Although a few individuals such as John Dewey were able to make the distinction between Trotskyism and Stalinism, most critics of communism could not. They rejected the argument of Trotskyists, that the history of the Soviet Union would have been manifestly different had Trotsky become the leader. In the decade after Trotsky's death, as the fear of the spread of communism gripped the west, communist alternatives to Stalinism were not readily understood or appreciated. The distinction between Trotskyism and Stalinism was ignored because western anti-communists saw them both as children of the same parent – communism. Both were manifestations of the same inherently flawed system.

Because Trotsky was careful never to criticise the party itself, directing his attacks instead against the Stalinist bureaucracy, many Western commentators dismissed Trotskyism as sour grapes. Most Cold War historians, however, failed to realise that the purges of the 1930's had eliminated many alternative visions for the Soviet Union. Events such as the great terror were seen as the practical expression of communist ideology itself rather than attributed to the leader who actually carried it out. According to this view, Trotsky as leader of the Soviet Union would have eventually made himself dictator and used the same methods of terror and repression as Stalin had.

Trotsky's support of War Communism showed that he supported the central power of the Party over Russian society – something for which he would criticise Stalin right up until his death. Marx had envisaged that after the revolution the **state** would 'wither away'. Under War Communism, however, the Soviet state took its first steps towards dominating Russian society. Trotsky's formulation of the militarisation of labour was seen as a forerunner to Stalin's gulags.

Trotsky wrote numerous works that took great pains to highlight the ways in which Stalin had become the 'grave-digger' of the revolution, the most notable of which was *The Revolution Betrayed*. In this, he presented his own vision for the Soviet Union as the path to true communism, while Stalinism was attacked as a major deviation from Marxism. He criticised Stalin on a number of fronts including the methods with

which he implemented collectivisation, his betrayal of the international revolution, his growing dictatorship over society and the creation of a new class of party bureaucrats.

The problem for Trotsky was that over time Stalin actually adopted many of his ideas and policies. In 1928 just after Trotsky had been banished from the Soviet Union, Stalin ended the NEP. In the 1930's he collectivised agriculture and began his program of rapid industrialisation – changes that Trotsky had consistently called for. After Trotsky's death, Stalin used the **superpower** status of the Soviet Union to spread communism throughout Europe. Although Trotsky actually opposed the idea of revolution by conquest, his theory of permanent revolution was seen in the West as the inspiration behind the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe after World War Two. In the eyes of the western world, Trotsky's ideas were not markedly different from those of Stalin. This partly explains why he was shunted from one European nation to the next during his exile.

4. Was Trotsky a naïve idealist or a pragmatic revolutionary?

In attempting to explain why he failed to secure the leadership of the Communist Party, Trotsky has often been seen as a **naïve idealist** who refused to play the political game. This seems to be a characteristic of his entire political career, in which he often championed minority positions. Despite his superior oratory and understanding of Marxism, Trotsky was frequently on the losing side of a debate. His isolation during the power struggle was therefore not surprising, nor was it something new. Trotsky was the perpetual dissenter who had at some point opposed Lenin, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Bukharin, Stalin and most other Bolshevik leaders. Although he could dogmatically defend his views in hours of party room debate, he often failed to look beyond his ideals when it would have been politically astute to do so. This was a skill Stalin was the master of.

Trotsky's errors of judgement reveal his naivety about the nature of political power. After more than a decade of disagreement with Lenin, Trotsky eventually abandoned his criticism and joined the Bolsheviks about two months before the October Revolution. This showed some willingness to compromise, although it must be said that he let the feud with Lenin go on far longer than it needed to. While there were genuine differences of opinion between the two men, these should not have prevented Trotsky from joining the Bolsheviks for so long. Others Bolsheviks shared views similar to those of Trotsky. Although Trotsky identified with the Bolsheviks more than any

other party, especially after the outbreak of World War One, he was unable to swallow his pride and join Lenin's party. Nevertheless, in the space of a few years, he went from being the main critic of Bolshevism to being hailed by Lenin as one of the finest Bolsheviks. Whether or not he realised it at the time, however, Trotsky's eleventh hour conversion to Bolshevism had done irreparable damage to his future political career.

Trotsky failed to use his stature after the Civil War to create a large enough support-base within the party. For example, he compromised when he shouldn't have over the publication of Lenin's testament. His elevation of the party above its leadership meant that he ignored opportunities to consolidate his power after the Civil War. This was the high point of his career and the best opportunity for Trotsky to promote himself as Lenin's successor. However his failure to understand the political importance of this opportunity, made it impossible for Trotsky to become General Secretary of the Party instead of Stalin. The fact that the position didn't interest him, however, is further proof that he lacked the political vision of Stalin. When he finally did make his protest public, his decline had gathered irreversible momentum.

Despite his political naïvety, Trotsky was not a dogmatist who was incapable of compromise. His inflexible attitude had cost him political power, but when it came to the survival of the revolution, Trotsky was more than willing to suspend his ideological judgement. In this sense he seems to have placed the fate of the revolution above his own political future. As Foreign Commissar at Brest-Litovsk, Trotsky was realistic enough to know that Russia was in no position to turn the European war into a revolutionary crusade on behalf of the working classes of Europe, as others such as Bukharin wanted. A major compromise of principle was also needed as War Commissar when he turned to former officers of the Tsar to lead the Red Army. It seems somewhat out of character that Trotsky would depend on **class enemies** to defend the revolution and although he was roundly criticised for it, this decision helped save the revolution. At the same time he was not so naïve to believe that members of the former ruling class would enthusiastically defend the Bolshevik revolution of their own free will. Through the appointment of political commissars he was able to keep these officers in check. His willingness to 'build the new house with the bricks of the old' was also demonstrated through his use of **bourgeois specialists** whilst Commissar for Transport.

Today, Trotsky's faith in the inevitability of international revolution is seen as an example of his ideological tunnel vision. Despite the spread of communism during the Cold War, the international revolution never eventuated and the chances of it occurring today have never been more remote. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the major sponsor of worldwide revolution disappeared. To those who live

in the post-Cold War era, Trotsky's fixation on international revolution seems out of touch and hopelessly idealistic. Because the concept of permanent revolution was so central to Trotsky's thinking, it is therefore tempting to dismiss him as an idealist who could not think beyond the confines of Marxist dogma. The benefit of hindsight, however, provides us with an advantage Trotsky never had. The mood of our time is vastly different from that of Trotsky's. Those who did not live through the first half of the twentieth century cannot fully appreciate the inspiration the October Revolution provided workers and soldiers across the world. As the threat of revolution ebbed and flowed throughout the best part of the Twentieth century, Trotsky's concept of permanent revolution seemed perfectly logical.

Perhaps the final word on Trotsky's career should be that of Trotsky himself. In his final testament, written on 27 February 1940, just months before his death, Trotsky touched on the issues of whether or not his ideals had been worth pursuing. The words of Leon Trotsky's last testament speak volumes in this regard.

For forty-three years of my conscious life I have remained a revolutionist; for forty-two of them I have fought under the banner of Marxism. If I had to begin all over again I would of course try to avoid this or that mistake, but the main course of my life would remain unchanged. I shall die a proletarian revolutionist, a Marxist, a **dialectical materialist**, and consequently, an irreconcilable **atheist**. My faith in the communist future of mankind is not less ardent – indeed it is firmer today than it was in the days of my youth.

Natasha has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence and enjoy it to the full.

Trotsky, L. *Testament of Leon Trotsky*.

GLOSSARY

saboteur: someone whose secret purpose is to destroy an organisation from the inside

Trotskyism: broadly represents the view that communism was not given a chance to succeed due to Stalin's deviation from true Marxism; specifically identifies the writings of Trotsky as evidence of a genuine communist alternative to Stalin's USSR

indoctrination: being told what to think as opposed to arriving at one's own conclusion

apparatchik: a party official who performs a particular function in service to the party

ideologue: someone who makes decisions based on their political point of view rather than practical considerations

petty bourgeois: related to the values and attitudes of the lower middle classes

state: the government of a sovereign nation

superpower: a military power of world stature that attracts the support of smaller nations. This applied to both the USSR and USA during the Cold War that developed after World War Two

naïve idealist: someone whose guidance by high principles makes them unaware of the practical reality of a situation

dogmatist: someone who always accepts a set of beliefs as being their guiding authority

class enemies: an economic group whose interests are in conflict with one's own

bourgeois specialist: middle class experts in a number of technical fields

dialectical materialism: a branch of philosophy that stresses the importance of physical matter, which is in a constant state of tension and transformation. Marxism belongs to this branch of philosophy.

atheist: someone who has no belief in a god

EXTENDED RESPONSE QUESTIONS:

Historical interpretations of Leon Trotsky

1. Discuss how history has judged Leon Trotsky.
2. Account for the existence of different historical perspectives on Leon Trotsky.
3. Evaluate the view that it is impossible to arrive at a balanced interpretation of Leon Trotsky's career.

APPENDIX

FURTHER READING

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