

Reassessing Trotsky

Geoffrey Swain

He planned the Revolution and won the Civil War.
Where did it all go wrong for Trotsky?

Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev: leading Bolsheviks who advised against staging a coup in October 1917.

General Lavr Kornilov: tsarist officer whose attempt to overthrow the Provisional Government in August 1917 was defeated by the Bolshevik Red Guards.

Petrograd Soviet: elected council representing soldiers, sailors and workers. It claimed the right to govern and occupied the opposite wing of the Winter Palace to the Provisional Government. Many deputies sat in both bodies. Trotsky was a strong supporter of the Soviet.

Kadets (from their initials *Kah-Dets* in Russian): main liberal constitutional party in Russia, which wanted to establish a parliamentary system of government.

Constituent Assembly elections: the Provisional Government was only supposed to govern until a proper constitution had been drawn up by a constituent assembly elected for that purpose. The elections were due in November 1918.

Key concept

Role of the individual

Before you read this

You will probably get a set of notes on Trotsky's career, if you do not have one already. For this article, make sure you are clear on the difference between the party, the Soviet and the state.

Leon Trotsky is perhaps best known for the surreal manner of his death — a clean blow to his head with an ice axe wielded by one of Stalin's agents in the Mexican heat on 20 August 1940. The assassination brought to an end more than a decade in which, from his various bases of exile, Trotsky had unmasked the terror and hypocrisy of the USSR in the 1930s. The bitterness of the recriminations between these two men who, in 1918, had been Lenin's closest confidants, has masked an objective consideration of Trotsky's strengths and weaknesses.



Lev Kamenev.

Trotsky: architect of the October Revolution

Without Trotsky, the Bolsheviks would not have come to power in October 1917. Historians of the October Revolution have tended to focus on the clash between Lenin and those Bolsheviks like **Grigory Zinoviev** and **Lev Kamenev** who opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power, and have ignored the differences of approach which existed even among those Bolsheviks who favoured armed insurrection.

After **General Lavr Kornilov's** attempt to seize power, the Bolsheviks secured a majority on the **Petrograd Soviet** for the first time on 1 September and from then on, it became clear that there was a growing groundswell of opinion in favour of establishing a Soviet government; a government made up of those parties represented within the Soviet (excluding, therefore, the Liberal **Kadets**), which would rule until the **Constituent Assembly elections** in November.

Alexander Kerensky countered by forming a Third Coalition government and, to give that government a degree of popular support, he created a semi-constitutional body called the Preparliament, made up of representatives from all Russia's political parties and social organisations. Moderate Bolsheviks like Zinoviev and Kamenev argued that this offered a parliamentary road for the transfer of power. The Bolsheviks could work within the Preparliament, pass a vote of no confidence in Kerensky's Third Coalition, and summon a Second Congress of Soviets which would demand the formation of a Soviet government.

Lenin and Trotsky rejected this parliamentary road, persuaded a reluctant Bolshevik Central Committee to boycott the Preparliament, and then, at the famous Central Committee session on 10 October 1917, persuaded the party to prepare for insurrection. It was after this vote that tension between Lenin and Trotsky began to emerge. Lenin had always assumed that the insurrection would be the work of the Bolshevik Party. The Bolshevik Party had its own Military Organisation, and, for Lenin, it seemed obvious that the way forward was to use troops loyal to the Military Organisation, stationed outside Petrograd, to



Trotsky speaking to new Red Army recruits at the beginning of the Civil War, 1918.

march into the capital in a show of force. Trotsky looked not to the Bolshevik Party's Military Organisation, but to the Soviet. While Lenin proposed an offensive operation carried out by the Bolshevik Party, Trotsky envisaged a defensive action carried out by the Soviet.

Ever since the February Revolution and **Order Number 1**, the Soviet had guarded jealously its right to oversee the deployment of troops away from the capital. Yet, as the German army advanced ever closer to Petrograd, this was precisely the issue Kerensky began to address. The Soviet was keen to frustrate any plans Kerensky might develop to remove revolutionary troops from the capital, so it endorsed the proposal to form a Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) whose commissars would monitor troop movements. Trotsky foresaw how Kerensky could be provoked. As the MRC became bolder in its demands, Kerensky would lose patience and challenge its authority. When Kerensky came out against the Soviet, the Soviet would defend itself, resist Kerensky and in the process, overthrow him.

Trotsky's plan worked perfectly. Kerensky was provoked. On 24 October he closed down the Soviet press and ordered the arrest of the MRC **commissars**. When troops loyal to Kerensky tried to secure Petrograd, they were confronted by troops mobilised by the MRC. By the end of the day, the capital was effectively in the hands of the MRC. When, at midnight, Lenin demanded Kerensky's overthrow, the Bolshevik action moved on to the offensive and, as it did so, it met with increasing resistance. It was not until 2 a.m. on 26 October

Key points

- Without Trotsky, the Bolsheviks would not have come to power in October 1917.
- In order to seize power, Trotsky looked not to the Bolshevik Party's military organisation, but to the Petrograd Soviet, envisaging it carrying out a defensive action rather than the offensive operation by the party which Lenin proposed.
- Trotsky attributed his success in creating an effective Red Army to: propaganda, organisation, supplies, discipline, revolutionary example, repression and professional leadership.
- For Trotsky the crucial lesson of the Civil War had been the need to work closely with experts: the professional officer corps. It should be the same when the Civil War ended.
- Trotsky clashed with Lenin again over the Gosplan agency, insisting that broad strategy should be the work of the party leadership but implementation of that strategy should be the work of the professionals.
- Trotsky feared that a counter-revolution could be achieved via Bukharin's concessions to the peasants.

Alexander Kerensky: socialist revolutionary, prime minister (July–November 1917) in Provisional Government.

Order Number 1: decree of the Petrograd Soviet issued in March 1917 that it had authority over all troops in political (and, in effect, military) matters.

commissars: political officers attached to military units to enforce political orthodoxy and discipline and to guard against counter-revolutionary activity.



1920 poster showing a Red Army soldier with Trotsky's likeness stamping on Poland.

Party of Socialist Revolutionaries: political revolutionary party representing the views of Russia's peasants.

We need to go hunting for good material on Trotsky: there is plenty just on these websites: www.trotsky.net/ has a wide collection of material, including the US journalist John Reed's eye-witness account of the October Revolution and many of Trotsky's own speeches, all peppered with profanation marks.

You can see a good selection of portraits of Trotsky at