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

General Lavr Kornilov:

October 1917.

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.

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.

eon 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.



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

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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 counterrevolution 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.



that the Bolsheviks could announce that power was in their hands. As Trotsky noted later, 'although an insurrection can win on the offensive, it develops better the more it looks like self-defence'.

Trotsky: creator of the Red Army

In Trotsky's words, by August 1918, the Bolsheviks were hanging on to power 'by a thread'. In May 1918, the **Party of Socialist Revolutionaries** (SR) and the **Czechoslovak Legion** joined forces in an anti-Bolshevik insurrection supported by the British and the French. In July 1918, the **Left SRs** assassinated the German ambassador and organised a mutiny among the Red Army troops confronting the Czechoslovaks on the River Volga. On 7 August, the Czechoslovaks captured the city of Kazan and

ed to go hunting for good material on Trotsky: there is plenty just on websites.

We trotsky net/ has a wide collection of material, at the US journalist John Reed's eye-witness account of the October seation many of Trotsky's own speeches, all peppered with

e a good selection of portraits of Trotsky at Selection, and photos and writings (including his thrilling life archive:

archive/frotsky/index.htm.

Ouestions

- If Trotsky was responsible for planning the October Revolution, why did he let Lenin take all the credit?
- From Trotsky's point of view, what was the difference between the party and the Red Army?
- Was Trotsky right to fear a Thermidor?
- If Trotsky could overthrow Kerensky and beat the Whites, why could he not overcome his opponents in the party?

the Red Army retained control only of Sviyazhsk, the settlement surrounding the bridge that carried the railway across the Volga; if the bridge were lost, the road to Moscow would be open.

When Trotsky arrived in Sviyazhsk on 9 August, he reported to Moscow that he faced a Red Army in 'a state of psychological collapse'. Reinforcements were promised constantly, but never dispatched. The first task was supplies. Trotsky's first request to Moscow was for horses and aviation fuel. Then he picked up rumours of 'a huge quantity of supplies' in the Volga town of Nizhnyi Novgorod; he immediately ordered its transfer to Sviyazhsk. A few days later, he wanted to know why the field guns he ordered had not arrived. After field guns it was field telephones; and then, in order to improve morale, it was 'a dentist and a good band'. An accompanying journalist recalled, 'Some kind of enormous, cumbersome, lame apparatus began to operate... Trotsky managed to restore the supply lines, got new artillery and a few regiments...newspapers arrived, boots and overcoats

It was not just a question of supplies. Trotsky had an innate sense of strategy. He appreciated quickly that the Red Army's weakness in artillery could be countered through the use of air power. At his initiative, an air squadron was quickly improvised and soon Trotsky could tell Lenin, 'We are terrorising bourgeois Kazan by dropping large quantities of dynamite on it'.

Combating psychological collapse not only needed improved supplies, but also improved discipline. Here Trotsky was ruthless. When, on 14 August, some deserters tried to seize a steamer and sail up the Volga to the safety of Nizhnyi Novgorod, Trotsky had them executed summarily, showing no compassion for their Bolshevik commissar. A fortnight later, 20 deserters were shot after a surprise attack had taken the Red Army unawares. On 15 August, Trotsky informed Lenin that he had devised special mounted squads, ten men strong and composed mostly of Communists, which were used to patrol the rear when an advance was underway to prevent soldiers retreating in panic.

Ill-discipline was not confined to the rank and file. After one operation was wrecked by the refusal of two divisional commanders to obey orders, Trotsky had them arrested. When commissars intervened on their behalf, they too were arrested. The role of officers in the Red Army caused a moment of tension between Lenin and Trotsky. Lenin was worried that Trotsky's officers, even his most senior commanders, were politically suspect. He was keen to send in a new officer corps of loyal Communists, former non-commissioned officers fast-tracked through the ranks. Trotsky had no time for such 'party ignoramuses'. He trusted the young general staff officers who had rallied to the Red Army and insisted they should not be replaced.

Trotsky summed up his experience in Sviyazhsk thus: 'Propaganda, organisation, revolutionary example and repression produced the necessary change in a few weeks; a vacillating, unreliable and crumbling mass was transformed into a real army'. It was a modus operandi that Trotsky was to repeat throughout the Civil War as his armoured train zigzagged from front to front and finally to victory: supplies, discipline and professional leadership. It was, as Trotsky said, 'at once much and little; it needed good commanders, a few dozen experienced fighters, a dozen or so Communists ready to make any sacrifice, boots for the bare-footed, a bath-house, an energetic propaganda campaign, food, underwear, tobacco and matches'.

Conclusion: Trotsky and 'Thermidor twaddle'

For Trotsky, a crucial lesson of the Civil War was the need to work closely with experts, with the professional officer corps. It was the same when the Civil War was over. If the country was serious about its socialist credentials, it needed to employ the best economic experts and develop a full-blown economic plan. Trotsky insisted that the state planning agency, Gosplan, should be staffed by leading economists and this led him into another conflict with Lenin. For Trotsky it was simple: Gosplan would operate like the Red Army's Staff HQ. Broad strategy would be the work of the party leadership, but implementing that strategy would be the work of professionals.

Lenin wanted to ensure Gosplan was fully under the control of the Communist Party and, as his health faded, it was Zinoviev who increasingly argued the case for party control. When Trotsky wrote in 1922, 'the ruling party does not at all mean the party directly administering every detail of every affair', it was Zinoviev who countered that the Bolshevik Party 'must direct economic life', and Stalin who began to construct a party apparatus which would do just that.

Why was it that the party apparatus being constructed by Stalin was so hostile to Trotsky's technocratic vision of socialist planning? When Trotsky mused on this in December 1923, he first

raised the danger of Thermidor. Soviet Russia in the 1920s was not yet a socialist state. The New Economic Policy introduced in 1921 had established a mixed economy, with heavy industry owned by the state, but light industry and agriculture in private hands. Could it be that private capital was succeeding in exerting an influence on the party bureaucracy? Could a slow counter-revolution be under way as the state apparatus was gradually restructured in a bourgeois direction? For Trotsky, this danger, once raised, became an obsession. In 1923 he kept these thoughts to himself, but once Bukharin had emerged as the dominant figure in the party in 1925 and told the peasantry 'enrich yourselves', Trotsky began an open campaign against Thermidor. For Trotsky, Bukharin's concessions to the peasantry were clear proof that counter-revolutionary forces were already well entrenched in the party bureaucracy and counterrevolution was not far off.

For Stalin, talk of Thermidor was just so much twaddle: the party's apparatus was the embodiment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, not an agent of counter-revolution. Crucially, when in 1926 Zinoviev and Kamenev joined in Trotsky's critique of Bukharin's pro-peasant policy, they did not endorse Thermidor. For them, Bukharin was wrong to make concessions to the peasantry and wrong to rely on Stalin's apparatus to enforce his will, but they never accepted that the party's apparatus had succumbed to peasant pressure. Trotsky's talk of peasant-based counter-revolution infiltrating the Bolshevik Party apparatus reminded Bolsheviks that, before the revolution, Trotsky had been a Menshevik. He had criticised Lenin's writings on party organisation and had shared the Mensheviks' disdain for the peasantry. 'Thermidor twaddle' helped isolate Trotsky from his fellow Bolsheviks and made it that much easier for Stalin to move against him.

Professor Geoffrey Swain is Alec Nove Professor of Russian and East European Studies at the University of Glasgow and the author of numerous books on Russian and east European history. His most recent publication is *Trotsky* in the Pearson Longman *Profiles in Power* series (2006).

Further reading

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Czechoslovak Legion: unit of Czech troops which fought for the Austro-Hungarian empire in the war and found themselves stranded in Russia during the Civil War. They fought on the White side and proved formidable opponents.

Left SRs: those socialist revolutionaries who had some sympathy with Bolshevik policy and aims.

Thermidor: coup in the
French Revolution (named
after the month in the
revolutionary calendar when
it happened). The extremist
government was overthrown by its rivals in the
French National
Convention, and its leaders
were executed.