

The historical debate about the October 1917 coup is discussed further on pages 168-69. Some of the questions include the nature of the roles of Lenin and Trotsky, and whether it was indeed a Bolshevik coup or simply a tide of revolution on which the Bolsheviks were prepared to ride.

What roles did Lenin and Trotsky play in the events of 1917?

In many respects, the October revolution was the work of two very single-minded 'professional' revolutionaries: Lenin, who provided the leadership and fire, and Trotsky, who contributed the military brain. Neither had been in a position to play any part in the February revolution, since they were both in exile. Nevertheless, once the autocracy crumbled, both were determined to return to Russia and influence its future.

Neither Lenin nor Trotsky was very familiar with the lives of the ordinary people of Russia. They were both educated men from relatively wealthy backgrounds, who had spent most of their adult lives abroad. Lenin had lived outside Russia since 1900 (except for a very brief return during the 1905 revolution) and had spent the latter years in Switzerland. Meanwhile, Trotsky had spent most of the previous ten years in exile, living in various cities including Vienna, Zurich, Paris and – from January 1917 – New York. The two men shared a deep hatred of the old regime and a commitment to Marxism and political activism.

From Switzerland, Lenin tried to gain re-entry to Russia in 1917 through negotiations with the Germans, who believed his return would cause chaos and so undermine the Russian war effort. Nevertheless, the Germans were prepared to offer him safe passage by train through Frankfurt, Berlin and Stockholm (in neutral Sweden), although only in a 'sealed' train, confining Lenin and his band of followers to a locked compartment.

Lenin's arrival at Petrograd on 3 April marked the beginning of a series of events that would propel Russia towards the October revolution. Lenin was uncertain of what sort of reception awaited him, and half-expected to be arrested on leaving the train. However, his fears turned out to be unfounded. His reputation had gone before him, and he was greeted by a cheering band of soldiers and workers who were convinced that Lenin could somehow ensure that their needs were met.

SOURCE 1

On arriving in Petrograd in 1917, Lenin made an inspiring declaration.

... the worldwide socialist revolution is dawning, European capitalism is on the brink of collapse. Soldiers, comrades! We must fight for a socialist revolution in Russia! We must fight until [we achieve] the total victory of the proletariat! Long live the worldwide socialist revolution!

Quoted in Sixsmith, M. 2011. Russia. London, UK. BBC Books. p. 194.

Lenin's absolute confidence that a proletarian revolution would soon be achieved within Russia ensured that he stood out from other socialist leaders, who had argued that Russia had to go through a bourgeois/liberal phase before it would be possible to establish a working man's government. Lenin had reached the conclusion (as had Trotsky before him) that it was both possible and desirable to create a working-class government in Russia, despite the country's backwardness. He believed that the creation of such a government would help trigger revolutions in the more developed capitalist countries, which would in turn give support to the Russian workers. This theory of 'permanent revolution' made a proletarian revolution an immediate possibility. It also made it vital to have a policy of 'no compromise' with the bourgeoisie. The first two Bolsheviks to return from exile (in Siberia), Stalin and Kamenev, supported the Provisional Government. However, Lenin demonstrated his authority and leadership by declaring himself firmly against any such agreement.

Lenin also believed that the Provisional Government's liberal democracy was not in the proletariat's interests. He described it as a mere façade for the dictatorship (rule) of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, because the trade unions wanted to work with the capitalists to improve their members' conditions, he condemned these unions too. According to Lenin, true revolutionary action on the proletariat's behalf required a vanguard party (a pioneering group) to educate the workers and peasants politically. This education would help them rise above the low political expectations of 'trade-union consciousness'. Lenin's theorising helped him to justify the Bolsheviks' quest for power. He claimed that the Bolsheviks were that vanguard party, who would develop 'true revolutionary class consciousness' and fulfil the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. In other words, they would rule by, and in the interests of, the ordinary working people.

Lenin's first act in the Petrograd Soviet was to produce a manifesto, which became known as the April Theses. In this manifesto, he urged the soviets to overthrow the Provisional Government and create a dictatorship of the proletariat. He concluded with the powerful slogan 'All power to the soviets!' even though the Bolshevik Party was, as yet, only a minor influence within the soviets.

The April Theses also made promises that other leaders had hesitated to offer, such as an end to the war, land for the peasants, and an improvement in the food supplies in the towns. This was just what the workers, peasants and soldiers wanted to hear, and 'peace, bread and land' became their rallying cry. Lenin rapidly understood and responded to the public mood. By June 1917, he was able to stand up in the Petrograd Soviet and declare, 'To those who say there is no political party ready to take full responsibility for power in Russia, I say, Yes there is! ... We Bolsheviks will not shirk the task. We are ready here and now to assume the fullness of power.'

Trotsky left New York in March, but his ship was detained by British naval officials in Canada and he only arrived back in Russia on 4 May. Although Trotsky shared Lenin's ideas on permanent revolution, he did not commit himself to the Bolshevik Party immediately. Nevertheless, he quickly established his influence, joining the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which had been formed in June.

Trotsky was arrested after the unsuccessful July Days rising in Petrograd. While he was in prison, he became a committed Bolshevik. After his release, following Kornilov's unsuccessful uprising, Trotsky was elected chairman of the Petrograd Soviet on 26 September. (The Bolsheviks had recently come to dominate the Petrograd Soviet by altering the membership regulations.) Trotsky was an expert strategist and he immediately set about turning the Soviet into an arm of the Bolshevik Party.

On 5 October, the commander of the Petrograd Military District, following Kerensky's instructions, ordered most of the capital's revolutionary-leaning garrison units to prepare for immediate transfer to the front. This action sparked a general mutiny, with most of the troops declaring their loyalty to the Petrograd Soviet. On 9 October, the Soviet adopted a militant resolution, written by Trotsky. This called for the creation of a 'military revolutionary centre' to 'facilitate the defence of Petrograd from the attacks being openly prepared by military and civil Kornilovites'.

Lenin, still in exile in Finland, believed the time was right for an immediate coup. However, his letters to the Bolshevik Central Committee in Petrograd did not find immediate favour. Even Trotsky initially urged that they should wait for the second Congress of Soviets before launching the revolution. Such was Lenin's frustration that he returned secretly and in disguise to a meeting of the Central Committee in Petrograd, on 10 October. At the meeting, he bullied the committee into supporting his plans. Trotsky was persuaded and took Lenin's side against Zinoviev and Kamenev. The vote was eventually agreed: ten in favour of an immediate coup, and two (Zinoviev and Kamenev) against such action.

It was largely left to Trotsky to organise the revolution. Speakers were sent round factories to ensure the vital support that was needed for success. Trotsky took personal charge of the new Military Revolutionary Committee of the Soviet, which (from 18 October onwards) began to gather troops at the Bolshevik headquarters in the Smolny Institute. Since the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries refused to join this group, it became a Bolshevik fighting force, which was made up of militias from the Bolshevik Red Guards, former soldiers and policemen.

Red Guards marching through Moscow in 1917



The garrison crisis (see page 166) escalated and the Military Revolutionary Committee appointed commissars who were sent to all the city's troop units to win their loyalty. In total, 15 of the 18 garrisons declared allegiance to the Soviet rather than the Provisional Government. According to Czech historian Michael Reiman, this was the beginning of the October revolution. He wrote:

'Already on October 21st and 22nd the Military Revolutionary Committee, in effect, took upon itself authority over the [Petrograd] garrison. Its actions, from both a practical and a judicial standpoint, would be considered by any nation a clear case of mutiny and insurrection.'

Trotsky too argued, in *Lessons of October*, that the Petrograd Soviet entered a state of armed revolution before 25 October. He wrote:

'From the moment when we, as the Petrograd Soviet, invalidated Kerensky's order transferring two-thirds of the garrison to the front, we had actually entered a state of armed insurrection ... the outcome of the insurrection of October 25 was at least three-quarters settled, if not more, the moment that we opposed the transfer of the Petrograd garrison and created the Military Revolutionary Committee.'

Discussion point

Was the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 inevitable? Was the Provisional Government doomed from the start? Should such questions be asked by historians?

Problems of interpretation

This interpretation of the events of October 1917 suggests that Trotsky's role was vital to the success of the revolution. It also suggests that he played a bigger part than Lenin, who eventually emerged from hiding to take charge on the night of 25 October only after the Military Revolutionary Committee had directed its units to seize the key points of the capital. But Eisenstein's film *October*, which originally gave both Lenin and Trotsky starring roles, was re-cut in the Stalinist era to portray Trotsky as a coward who hesitated at the start of revolution while the Bolshevik troops marched forward. Consequently, Trotsky was never given any credit by Soviet historians for his actions in October 1917. Indeed, some books on the period still emphasise the importance of Lenin's role, at Trotsky's expense.

The parts played by Lenin and Trotsky, both individually and collectively, are still interpreted in different ways. For example, Richard Pipes suggests that Lenin's drive, as the leader of a coup, was the main factor behind the October revolution. However, he also acknowledges the crucial role played by Trotsky in the actual organisation of the revolution. His view is that Lenin and Trotsky led an 'aggressive minority' and exploited the confusion that existed in Russia by October 1917 in order to seize power.

Stephen Smith challenges this interpretation and stresses the importance of the lower ranks of the Bolshevik Party. He also puts forward the view that the revolution was essentially a 'popular uprising', which both Lenin and Trotsky harnessed but did not propel.

Sheila Fitzpatrick also takes this line and questions Lenin's control over the party. She emphasises the importance of the radicalism of workers, peasants and soldiers. While she acknowledges Lenin's ability to mobilise the masses and his mastery of propaganda, and praises Trotsky's organisational skills, she suggests the revolution was driven 'from below'.

Alexander Rabinowitch supports this view and stresses the extent to which the leadership responded to grass-roots radicalism in the cities. In short, while no one denies the significance of the parts played by both Lenin and Trotsky, the most recent historical appraisals suggest their roles were more organisational than inspirational.

Activity

Work with a partner to create a suitable diagram that provides the key facts to support detailed appraisal of the roles of Lenin and Trotsky in the events of 1917. Take one individual each, and complete the diagram as far as possible. You can return to this diagram and add further detail after you have studied Bolshevik Russia.