

MODERN HISTORY

Assess the contribution of Lenin and Trotsky to the period in which they lived. What were the strengths and weaknesses of both men?

Even in proletarian or bourgeois revolutions like in 1917 Russia, a Nation's leaders can make or break the opportunity for change. In Russia, Trotsky and Lenin worked together to bring about many improvements to their people, and it is through assessing each man's strengths and weaknesses that we are able to gain insight into their contributions to the period in which they lived.

Trotsky, like Lenin, was a brilliant and charismatic orator; yet his power lay in his ability to sacrifice his ideologies for the greater good, his role as a brilliant military general and a productive writer in exile. His downfall however, lay in his failure to gauge the Nationalistic feelings of the time, his arrogance and lack of interest in party politics.

Throughout his membership of the party, Trotsky revealed his willingness to sacrifice his ideologies for the good of the people. This was evident in his negotiations of the Treaty of Brest Litovsk as the Commissar of Foreign affairs in 1917. He opted for a policy of "no war, no peace" and postponed signing, but upon Lenin's insistence, he signed the now even harsher treaty. Although this caused devastating losses of territory and population, it shows that he was willing to sacrifice these imperialistic goals in order to relieve war suffering and give the Bolsheviks the breathing space they needed. Later, emotionally overwhelmed by the terms of the treaty, he resigned and refused to attend the final meeting. He later redeemed himself as he proposed a partial return to a free market as seen in Lenin's New Economic Policy. This was very effective in restoring productivity and wealth following the hardships of the Civil War, and thus boosted Bolshevik popularity. Historian Lunacharsky reinforces this, writing that "*Trotsky...emerged from the revolution having acquired an enormous degree of popularity.*"

This popularity is even more evident in his role in the Civil war. Trotsky was clearly a brilliant military strategist, as upon becoming the Commissar of War, he completely overhauled the Red Army, transforming the remnants of the Tsar's army of 800 000 soldiers into a united, disciplined army of 3 million. He acted with necessary ruthlessness, reinforcing conscription and employing the death penalty for desertion. German Diplomat, Max Bauer praised Trotsky as "*absolutely Napoleonic...a born military organiser & leader.*" He actively coordinated the war effort from his armoured train, inspiring the troops with his revolutionary enthusiasm and stirring speeches, winning the support of soldiers and workers. Of course he did employ the use of propaganda, but this was vital to his aims of recruiting and disciplining the Red Army, which was instrumental to the Bolshevik consolidation of power. Furthermore, his exploitation of the geographical and ideological separation of the Whites revealed what Robert Service called a "*fierce dynamic leadership.*"

Later while in exile, Trotsky proved himself to be a revolutionary exemplar, as he continued to write inexhaustibly; attempting to ignite worldwide revolution. In 1936, he published *The Revolution Betrayed*, an indictment of Stalin's betrayal of Bolshevik ideals. His writings drew international attention to Stalin's Show Trials and Purges, highlighting the corrupt system that Stalin was creating.

Unfortunately, it was his weaknesses that came to the fore in the end. His failure to gauge Nationalistic feelings of the time was apparent in his criticism of the NEP, which many saw as a betrayal of Lenin. Tactical errors raised doubts over his loyalty and respect; firstly missing Lenin's funeral, whether by Stalin's scheming, or by his own choice and then criticising the increasingly bureaucratic Party of not serving the people. Furthermore, he seemed to "lack faith in the Russian people" through his unwillingness to compromise his unpatriotic ideology of permanent revolution. While Stalin's nationalistic interpretation of socialism appealed to the increasingly patriotic nation, Trotsky's policies appeared very similar to those of the Mensheviks, thus further casting doubt on his loyalty. He ignored the fact that during the 15th Party Congress, he won only 1% of votes, yet fervently pursued the promotion of his ideas, thus breaching the anti-faction rule, hence justifying his dismissal from the party in 1928.

Trotsky arrogantly underestimated Stalin's power, dismissing him as a "dull mediocre," evidenced by Deutsher's comment that "*it seemed almost a bad joke...that Stalin should be his rival.*" This "far reaching self confidence," as described by Lenin, was also evident as the Provisional government called his bluff, sending him to jail after he challenged them to arrest him following the July Days.

Also vital to his loss of power was his lack of interest in party politics and dismissive attitude towards diplomacy. He was a man of the people, not of the party and indicating that he had very little interest in personal power, he resigned as Commissar of war, thus losing his power base, and stood idly by as Stalin eroded his political influence. He was less effective at managing the Party than Stalin and as historian Carr writes, he "*lacked...talent for leadership amongst equals.*" Perhaps his two major mistakes were his choice not to utilise his Red Army during the power struggle and his agreement to ignore Lenin's Testament, resulting in the loss of an opportunity to undermine Stalin's claim to Lenin's heir. This too was perhaps due to his arrogance, as historian Shukman writes "*Trotsky was intellectually arrogant. Brilliant and scintillating...he was also caustic, sarcastic and venomous.*"

Conversely, Lenin was often said to be selflessly kind, but he is also admirable for his intellectual ability, oratory skills, strong mind set, focus and political tactics. Ironically, but not contradictory to these assets, one of Lenin's major flaws was that he was in fact too steadfast and focused on the communist ideals and in trying to control the Party's composition, Lenin may have inspired Stalin's dictatorial and ruthless nature, leading to many disagreements within the Communist Party and devastating losses of the Russian populace.

Lenin's intellectual ability, persuasiveness and clear aims are evident in the momentous following that his leadership gained. It is interesting to note that despite disagreements within the party over the July Days, The October Revolution, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the NEP, Lenin's suggestions were eventually followed on all of these occasions. It is blatantly obvious that it was Lenin's leadership skills that kept the Party together, for soon after his death, factionalism and power struggles erupted, thus leading Russia into Stalin's formidable dictatorship.

Lenin's aims and sincere wish to see Russia become an egalitarian state no doubt inspired him to pursue the politics of Revolution so fervently. As Orlando Figes commented, "Lenin...was...a political machine...[he] lived for the revolution."

Lenin's April Theses gained instant popular support, promising land redistribution, worker's rights, better living standards and democratically elected Soviets. While Menshevik Internationalist Suchanov saw these as 'lavish promises and simple fairy tales,' it can be seen that where the Provisional government overlooked the primal needs of the impoverished population, promising revolutionary rights such as freedom of speech, press and assembly; Lenin was able to capture the attention and adoration of the Russian populace with his simplistic slogans 'Peace, Bread, Land' and 'All Power to the Soviets.'

Not all of his policies were admirable though. Lenin was steadfast and overly focused on his Marxist ideals, evident in his policy of War Communism. After the Bolshevik's most loyal followers rebelled during the Kronstadt mutiny of 1921, it became clear that War Communism had little popular support. Despite previous disagreement with Trotsky over introducing the NEP, Lenin now saw that this change was necessary to maintain power, but by this stage millions of Russians had died of starvation and famine, thus revealing that Lenin, unlike Trotsky, was unable to compromise his Marxist ideals for the good of society.

Through studying Lenin's actions, it can be suggested that perhaps his strict control over the party and the nation inspired Stalin's ruthless, dictatorial nature. From his ban on factions in 1921, to his silent elimination of undesirables in 1922, Lenin was devoted to maintaining a Party of elite intelligentsia that would not be questioned by its people. In announcing his NEP, he separated himself from his Marxist ideals and became more dictatorial as the party took control of major industries, restricted political freedoms, gave the Cheka more power and set up labour camps for political dissidents. This is later reflected in Stalin's systematic removals of members of the Politburo and Central Committee, his network of gulags and his formidable totalitarian regime. Sukhanov noticed in 1922 that 'A number of features of Bolshevism...revealed...its future hateful countenance.' Despite evident continuity between the policies of both men, it must be noted that Lenin's conduct could not have spurred Stalin's anti-Semitic, self-deified behaviour and thus while Stalin may have been somewhat influenced by Lenin's strict administration, it was his own greed that spurred his ruthlessness.

In conclusion, it can be seen that Trotsky's main contribution to the revolution was his militaristic brilliance and his role in the civil war, securing and consolidating Bolshevik Power. However, without Lenin's leadership, political tact and forward thinking, the October Revolution and the Civil war would not have been as effective. The fact that Trotsky's writings were banned in Russia and that Stalin felt the need to eradicate him indicates his political influence. Lenin's power is similarly indicated by the overwhelming and enduring adoration and dedication of the Russian people towards him.