

**Analyse the transition from Leninism to  
Stalinism in the USSR 1917 – 1930.**

The change of Russia from a tsarist regime in 1917 was a clear milestone in the country's history. The end of the short-lived Provisional Government was inevitable and later that year it was Lenin who established his socialist ideology, elements of which were to become the political undercurrent of the country for the next 74 years. Stalin was by no means Lenin's obvious successor, indeed he was not even considered to be a serious contender by some, but the fact that he did become the Russian leader is indicative of his personality. To look at the transition between the two styles of government it is imperative to place them in their historical context.

The abdication of Tsar Nicholas in February 1917 had not provided the magical answers to Russia's problems of food shortage, overpopulation, the railway network, and the country's general administration (Westwood, 1995, p226ff). However the lifting of restrictions on the press meant that the Bolshevik publication *Pravda* could be published again. When Stalin became one of its editors it propounded "support for the Provisional Government" and "co-operation with the Mensheviks" (Laver, 1998, p14). These opinions were against Lenin's beliefs but there was little he could do to govern the party effectively while exiled in Switzerland. Considering Lenin's absence the fact that by October 1917 he had arranged the coup, and that the Bolsheviks were in a position to stage it, is remarkable.

As Prime Minister (or as the more socialist-friendly titled 'Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars') Lenin's first declarations were the peace and land decrees. After the single month's peace, which had been agreed in Brest-Litovsk, Germany was on the offensive again in February 1918. The Bolshevik party's reaction was divided, but Lenin was determined to pursue peace at whatever cost. In March the treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed in which Germany imposed stricter terms on Russia: territory was conceded to Germany, and several states became independent. As a country, Russia lost 32% of its arable land, 26% of the railways, 33% of the factories, 75% of the iron and coal mines, and 62 million citizens (McCauley, 1993, p24). Despite having been a major proponent of the peace, Lenin was

not happy with the treaty and on Germany's defeat at the end of the First World War the treaty was declared "null and void" (Westwood, p272).

The contemporary land decree allowed the taking of private land by peasants, and although this was already going on in the countryside it was now to be organised by rural land committees. This had the effect of making the countryside "more chaotic than ever", and people left the towns believing they had a claim to the land. The population movement and countryside chaos had a negative impact on food supplies to urban areas (McCauley, p15). While the land decree was giving the peasants what they wanted it glibly overlooked the Bolshevik's longer term aim of nationalising the land. In much the same vein Lenin also ruled that factories were to be controlled by elected factory officials, and military ranks would be abolished allowing officers to be elected by the soldiers.

This destruction of centralised authority is wholly at odds with the secret formation of the Cheka who, under the leadership of Dzerzhinsky, were to be responsible for putting down counter-revolution and sabotage in the country. In reality the Cheka was never answerable to any authority, and it was "able to extend its powers unchecked" (Hosking, 1985, p60). In 1918 it carried out at least 6,300 executions (Wood, 1995, p53). The greatest objection to the Cheka's actions was the fact that many of the victims were killed not as a result of their actions but merely because of whom they were.

Another early action with long reaching effects was the Bolshevik dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 after the unsuccessful (for the Bolsheviks) outcome of its election. It had been hoped that the Assembly would provide a solid basis for the re-creation of Russian government, but the election result led to disagreement, and a statement from the central executive committee indicating the superiority of the congress of Soviets sealed its fate. Lenin dissolved the Assembly on the basis of the Left Social Revolutionaries being under-represented. A small unarmed protest had to be broken up by the Red Army, after which the All-Russian congress (controlled mainly by Bolsheviks) duly gave formal approval to Lenin's actions (Wood, p45ff).

It was also in January 1918 that a tsarist element, led by former generals including Kornilov and Denikin, formed an anti-Bolshevik movement (the Whites); by May they had an army of around 9,000 people (Wood, p55). In an ideological U-turn the Bolsheviks were compelled to form their own army for protection, and in February 1918 Trotsky founded the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. Recruitment was difficult, and conscription, primarily from the factories, was introduced three months later.

Strategically the Reds were better placed being both centrally located and controlled, while the Whites were geographically scattered around them – there were Southern, Eastern, South-Eastern and Northern fronts (McCauley, p27) on which action took place. The former Tsar Nicholas and his family were some of the first casualties of the Civil War in Ekaterinburg at the hands of the Bolsheviks, but they denied murdering the Empress and children as their supporters “would have found it difficult to reconcile [their] humanitarian ideals with the killing of women and children” (Westwood, p259). The Civil War was to run until 1920 and in its course involve many of the Entente powers: Japan and the USA led the Far Eastern assault in Siberia, the French were to fight in the Ukraine, and Britain in the North.

By 1920 the Whites had been defeated and the Reds controlled Russia. Their defeat had been for three main reasons: the geographical disjointedness of the Whites; the fact that the Western forces were still ‘demob happy’ after their defeat of Germany; and there had been little if any local support for an army which was perceived to be the “landlord class” (Wood, p59) by the Russia peasants. During the Civil War the concept of Bolshevism had been sculpted by necessity. Stalin became an essential leader in Lenin's eyes as he was seen to be a “true Bolshevik, ruthless to the core” (McCauley, p30). Stalin believed that the end justified the means and his actions, such as confiscating grain from peasants in the Don region for the army's use, caused much hardship to people even though it was being done in Lenin's name for the good of the party.

In order to survive the Civil War Russia was forced to adopt war communism which involved the state taking control of industry. Production dropped dramatically and money to pay for the costs of the war was in short supply. The government attempted to remedy this by printing more money, but this just led to a massive rate of inflation, and within three years of the Bolshevik's coup (1920) the rouble was worth a hundredth of its pre-Revolution value. This in turn exacerbated the problems of food supply, which had been an issue even before the Revolution. Farmers either had to sell their grain in towns and cities for high prices, or they had to barter; some people left towns to move to the villages in an attempt to survive. This process of trading did not fit in with the Bolshevik ideology, but the party only made half-hearted attempts to prevent it, as had it been completely stopped there would have been mass starvation (Hosking, p76). Support for the communists waned throughout the period of war communism and working class membership of party dropped dramatically.

Although the Bolsheviks were victorious at the end of the Civil War, they had won responsibility for a ruined country. Industry was practically non-existent, the rail transport system was worn out and the economic system of the country based on bartering was mediaeval. In February 1921 Lenin introduced his New Economic Policy (NEP) to try and rebuild Russia. The return of private trading, where the farmer would be in a position to sell surplus grain, was inevitable as the government had no means of distribution in place; by allowing this element of private trading the emergence of a market economy was guaranteed. The bureaucratic system of managing businesses changed, and individual businesses were given freedom to manage themselves; foreign companies were encouraged and welcomed to Russia.

After the war the Bolshevik party reorganised itself focussing on the Central Committee. From 1922 Stalin was the party's General Secretary and the post gave him a unique position within the party. He was not seen to have any great influence within the party, but his job entailed getting involved at the local party level and also preparing Politburo agendas at the highest echelons of the party (Laver, p20). During Lenin's convalescence after his first stroke in May 1922, Stalin promoted himself shamelessly as Lenin's close personal ally and he became identified with him in the public eye.

Despite being unable to work Lenin wrote his *Testament* while recovering, in which he clearly discusses Stalin's inability to cope with power, and suggests that Stalin should be exorcised from his post as General Secretary to avoid problems in future. On Lenin's death the party chose to keep the *Testament* hidden, and Stalin became the new Russian leader through both his careful planning of party personnel and the ineptitude of the other likely leaders, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky. Even after Lenin's death, Stalin still allied himself with him, creating a cult of Leninism, which is most clearly exemplified by his use of Lenin's embalmed body as an iconic religious figure for the country.

From 1924 Stalin adhered to Lenin's party line, but took any opportunity to force party members who did not agree with him out of their posts. By 1928 he had complete dictatorial control. It was at this point that Stalin ended Lenin's NEP and introduced, unsurprisingly with full party support, the first of his three five year plans. The first plan stipulated industrial production to increase by 180% and agricultural growth of 55%. While industrial growth on this scale was unfeasible, the agricultural increase appeared obtainable had it not been for the fact that markets were to be done away with; Stalin's solution was collectivisation.

By the time Stalin had ultimate control, he was concerned about opposition to him from all directions and it was because of this Stalinism became synonymous with tyrannical government. In 1916 Stalin reportedly quoted Ghengis Khan in his notes: "The death of the vanquished is necessary for the calm of the victors" (Laver, p41). This simple sentiment appears to be his personal justification for the NKVD, the purges of the 1930s, and the existence of the Gulags.

Lenin had believed that to effect social change the working classes must have some influence on the running of the country and that this would eventually lead to the disappearance of social strata. Based on the work of Marx and Engels, Lenin fought to reduce bureaucracy by ensuring free and democratic elections to all positions in the Soviet state, paying no official more than a skilled worker, and by giving everyone in society the opportunity to perform a role within the running of society – as Lenin wrote:

“Any cook should be able to be prime minister” (Gaunt, 1997, part two). Lenin’s ideology was also backed up by the way in which he chose to live: “In the Krelim [Lenin] still occupied a small apartment built for a palace servant. In the recent winter he, like everyone else, had had no heating” (Serge, 1967, p101). Lenin’s ideas were wholly ignored by Stalin and under his leadership the state became a powerful and elite body, and more of a permanent fixture rather than achieving the egalitarian society that Lenin had aspired to. Lenin’s humble lifestyle is also woefully at odds with the luxury of the Kremlin under Stalin and other future leaders.

Despite their different social beliefs, both Lenin and Stalin were successful in getting their personal aims carried out. This, of course, would have presented no problem for the dictator Stalin, but for Lenin to have achieved this is a more impressive feat. While things may have taken longer to achieve under Lenin, such as Russia’s withdrawal from the First World War, he was carefully steering the country according to his own ideology. This discreet authoritarian control could be argued to have been a forerunner of Stalin’s overt dictatorial regime.

The idea of political control through terror is usually more associated with Stalin than Lenin. However the foundations of the NKVD are visible in Lenin’s Cheka: “It was Lenin who laid the police state foundations which made Stalin’s monstrous feats technically possible” (Leggett, 1981). Although Lenin had the potential for creating misery on the scale of Stalin, he chose not to use it to such a degree. Stalin did use this power to an horrific extent as can be seen through the way in which he had the blood of many of his comrades and his former colleague Trotsky on his hands. His use of power was to achieve personal gain rather than to benefit the idea of communism on a wider scale as Lenin had tried to do.

Leninism and Stalinism are unquestionably linked. Lenin’s ideas of political control and of war communism lead to Stalin’s style of power, just on an incomparable scale. Despite these elements of continuity, the transition to Stalinism was a difficult one for the country, and although likely, it was by no means inevitable – Lenin’s *Testament* makes this clear. Even when Stalin was in power, his opposition

saw themselves as intellectually and morally superior to him, but these were not important areas to Stalin.

He was able to play on the innate human desire for power in his officials to build the Stalinist regime, while the remaining Leninist members of the Bolshevik party, such as Kamenev and Zinoviev, continued in their support for members of the working classes. It was because of this – what can only be seen as weakness – that Stalin was able to wield power and to obtain his position.

As Stalin based his principles on some aspects of Leninism, there were also elements that he did not take up. Lenin's liberal views about the importance of the party, his abhorrence of what was later to be called 'the cult of personality', and his more measured approach to economic reform were all ultimately dismissed Stalin. At the start of his life in the public eye, Stalin promoted himself as Lenin's disciple, but by the end of it he had succeeded in destroying the most constructive elements of the social legacy he had obtained through his Machiavellian actions.

When examining the transition from Leninism it could readily be argued, using the *Testament*, that the one thing that should not have come out of it was Stalinism. Considering this, the advent of Stalinism can only be seen to have come about as a direct result of the man himself and his remarkable influence on other people.

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