

Stalin's Defeat of Trotsky and His Allies: Key Sources

By Chris Corin, History Review 2011

Early moves against Trotsky

Chris Corin elucidates important documents relating to the power struggle after Lenin's death.

Studying the sources relating to the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky between 1923 and 1927 is highly revealing. It shows the importance of Stalin's position as Party Secretary and the way he used it, how Lenin was used as a weapon, and how the ban on factions was exploited.

Distrusted and feared, Trotsky became increasingly estranged from the party leadership. He became, in Ian Thatcher's words, 'a voice on the margins'. In October 1923 that voice was raised in an open letter of complaint to the Politburo demanding changes in the party organisation. A week later, inspired but not coordinated by Trotsky, a group of his supporters launched the Declaration of 46: a sweeping criticism of the record of the party leadership in which the triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin were dominant. It is important in the formation of the Left Opposition, and the full text is available on the internet. The signatories did not agree on everything, and some added their own comments, but all wanted more radical economic measures. The Declaration stated that the ban on factions of 1921 'had outlived itself' and that freedom of expression should be allowed within the party. The key point was that the party had become 'bureaucratised', and that Stalin had killed the tradition of internal party democracy. This became a central grievance of all the oppositions of the 1920s.

SOURCE 1

'We observe the ever increasing, and now scarcely concealed, division of the party between a secretarial hierarchy and the 'quiet folk', between professional party officials recruited from above and the general mass of the party which does not participate in the common life. Nowadays it is not the party, not its broad masses, who promote and choose members of the provincial committees and of the Central Committee of the RCP. On the contrary, the secretarial hierarchy of the party to an ever greater extent recruits the membership of conferences and congresses, which are becoming to an ever greater extent the executive assemblies of this hierarchy.'

(From the declaration of 46 leading Bolsheviks presented to the Politburo, 15 October 1923.)

The declaration could not be dismissed, as Trotsky's letter was, as personal ambition. It represented real, widespread and principled discontent within the party; but, although worried by it, the leadership met the challenge. The ground was prepared carefully in the press and at party meetings. At the party conference in January 1924 the declaration was condemned as factionalism and 'a direct departure from Leninism' – two accusations which would be used regularly by the leadership against all opposition in the 1920s.

Trotsky's theory of 'permanent revolution' presented the Bolshevik orthodoxy that socialism could not be achieved in Russia without a socialist revolution in the West. There was no sign of this occurring. Stalin's 'socialism in one country' bridged the big gap between theory and practice. It was a clever formulation which allowed Stalin both to attack Trotsky for lacking faith in the Russian people and their mission and to remind the party of Trotsky's non-Bolshevik past and brand him a Menshevik – a classic term of abuse in the Bolshevik lexicon. Throughout the struggle the contenders, as here and in Sources 3 and 4, were at pains to identify themselves with Lenin. Stalin ripped the phrase 'socialism in one country' from Lenin's writings. The theory was a complete distortion of his view but shrewd politics. It had a nationalist and patriotic appeal and it did not dictate a particular economic policy, allowing Stalin to switch to rapid industrialisation at the end of the 1920s – which also met with enthusiasm from party activists. Deutscher writes that later on Trotsky was to admit, off the record, that the ideas and slogans of the ruling group met an emotional need in the rank and file and that his Opposition was at variance with the popular mood.

SOURCE 2

Trotsky's 'permanent revolution' is the negation of Lenin's theory of the proletarian revolution; and conversely, Lenin's theory of the proletarian revolution is the negation of the theory 'permanent revolution'. Lack of faith in the strength and capabilities of our revolution, lack of faith in the strength and capabilities of the Russian proletariat – that is what lies at the root of the theory of 'permanent revolution'.

What difference is there between Trotsky's theory and the ordinary Menshevik theory that the victory of socialism in one country, and in a backward country at that, is impossible without the preliminary victory of the proletarian revolution 'in the principal countries of western Europe'? As a matter of fact there is no difference. There can be no doubt at all. Trotsky's theory of 'permanent revolution' is a variety of Menshevism ...

(Stalin on Permanent Revolution, from Problems of Leninism, 1924.)

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The defeat of the Left Opposition

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Trotsky was decisively defeated at the party conference in January 1924. By the following year, Stalin was moving against Zinoviev and Kamenev and they were becoming more critical of Stalin. The climax came at the end of Kamenev's bold speech directly challenging Stalin's leadership at the 14th Party Congress in December 1925.

SOURCE 3

Back to Lenin, we are against creating a theory of the *vozhd* [leader]; we are against making anyone into the *vozhd*. We are against the Secretariat, by actually combining politics and organisation, standing above the political body. We are for the idea of our leadership being organised in such a fashion that there should exist a really all-powerful Politburo, uniting all our party's politicians as well as that the Secretariat should be subordinate to it and technically carrying out its decrees (Noise) ...

Personally I suggest that our General Secretary is not the kind of figure who can unite the old Bolshevik high command around him (Noise). It is precisely because I've often said this personally to comrade Stalin and precisely because I've often said this to a group of Leninist comrades that I repeat it at the congress: I have come to the conclusion that Comrade Stalin is incapable of performing the role of unifier of the old Bolshevik high command. (Voices from the audience: 'Untrue!' 'Nonsense!' ... Stormy applause and shouts continue including 'Long live Comrade Stalin!')

(Kamenev at the 14th Party Congress, December 1925.)

The Party Congress was behaving in a way which chimed in completely with the warning in Source 1. Although Kamenev was allowed to finish his speech, the vote that followed was further evidence of Stalin's control of the Congress. Kamenev and Zinoviev were defeated by 559 votes to 65.

Within a week Stalin's team, led by Molotov, had swept into Leningrad. In less than three weeks they had spoken directly to over 60,000 factory workers who overwhelmingly approved of the decisions of the party congress and condemned factious opposition. Zinoviev and his supporters were deposed and Kirov was installed as the new Leningrad party boss. Zinoviev's 'impregnable fortress', the Leningrad party machine, was brushed aside leaving him, in E.H. Carr's words, 'helpless in the face of an adversary infinitely astuter and better prepared for the fray'. Stalin's hold on the party machine was clear and he was determined that the open expression of opposition should not be allowed again at a Party Congress.

Zinoviev and Kamenev's views on the NEP, on permanent revolution and the power of the Secretariat were closer to Trotsky's than to Stalin's, and in 1926 they and their supporters joined the Trotskyites to become the United Opposition. Stalin identified Zinoviev as the leader of all schismatic tendencies in the party and more dangerous than previous opposition leaders. This is in his letter of 25 June 1926 'to Molotov, Rykov, Bukharin and other friends'. Stalin took a two to three month summer vacation on the Black Sea coast and communicated his political will through confidential letters and coded telegrams to his key henchman Molotov.

Source 4 shows how Bukharin led the attack on the United Opposition. Bukharin's strong links with Lenin were important to Stalin, now that Krupskaya (Lenin's widow) had joined the opposition; and as Bukharin was determined to continue the NEP and the link with the peasants, he needed to stand with Stalin to defeat the Opposition's economic policies. Harassed by the party organisation and in a desperate return to the

conspiratorial tradition of the Tsarist era, the opposition resorted to secret meetings, including one in the woods outside Moscow. Bukharin denounced this as factionalism.

SOURCE 4

We Leninists have always imagined that the proletarian dictatorship can only be secure in our country if our party is in the first place the sole party in our country, that is, when the legal existence of other parties is made impossible, and in the second place the party is unitary in its structure, that is excluding any independent and autonomous groups, factions, organised currents, etc ... Now the whole oppositional bloc – Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Krupskaya etc – demands freedom for factions within the party ...

We cannot tolerate this. We say to these comrades: Defend your principles, declare your standpoint, speak in the party meetings; but if you take to the forest, if you chose the method of organising a new party within our party, the method of illegal organisation, then we shall fight you relentlessly.

(Bukharin: The party and the Opposition Bloc, July 1926.)

The conflict was bitter and Trotsky called Stalin the ‘gravedigger of the revolution’ at a Politburo meeting in 1926 – an outburst which even his wife and friends considered reckless in the extreme. Although Zinoviev refused to attend the ‘clandestine’ meeting in the woods, he was condemned for organising ‘schism in the party’. He was the first to be expelled from the Politburo. At the 15th Party Congress, delayed until December 1927, although Kamenev ‘submitted completely and fully to the party’ as the only way ‘a correct Leninist policy can triumph’, all three leaders of the United Opposition were expelled from the party. Their defeat would lead in 1929, as Trotsky had predicted, to the dethronement of Bukharin and his associates and the triumph of Stalin.

Chris Corin taught History at Worthing College. He is the author with Terry Fiehn of *Russia under Tsarism and Communism 1881-1953* (2nd edition, Hodder, 2011).

Stalin and the Communist Party

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The defeat of the Right

Having disposed of the left, Stalin was only half done. He then had the Congress reaffirm the principles of NEP but also lay the groundwork for the first Five Year Plan (FYP) which proposed the consolidation of agricultural production into large collective farms as well as a new emphasis upon heavy industry. The FYP, in fact, represented a sharp turning away from NEP toward centralised command of the economy. Initially, however, the transition was presented as a gradual and voluntary plan; there was no indication of the brutally coercive features of implementation which Stalin introduced several months later.

An ideological division had existed all along between a minority (led by Bukharin) in the party which was really enthusiastic about NEP as an alternative path to socialism, and a silent majority which regarded any such concessions to private enterprise as backsliding and a betrayal of Marxism. While Lenin was alive, this restive majority kept quiet, but always in the anticipation that NEP was transitory and that the drive to socialism would be rekindled at the first opportunity.

Stalin maintained a studied silence, whether out of respect for Lenin or for more opportunistic reasons. Prior to 1927-28, and especially in the period just after his 1924 lectures under the title 'Foundations of Leninism', he seemed to be squarely on the side of Bukharin and those who supported the continuation and even extension of NEP, while assiduously promoting the view that Trotsky and the left were anti-NEP and anti-peasant.

When Stalin performed his great turn-about in late 1927 and took over the left analysis, after disposing of its chief advocates, he was not only affirming his own true instincts but also reaping clear political benefits. Thus the decision to abandon NEP coincided with a concerted campaign to depict his former allies on the right as naive and too willing to make common cause with all peasants, including the rich kulaks.

At the end of May, 1928, Stalin sounded the new call to party members: the only solution was massive application of force against the recalcitrant kulaks. Harsh administrative measures were necessary as well to deal with 'wreckers' who were everywhere – in industry, in management, even in the party. Stalin hinted that the policies of the right and a general lack of vigilance were responsible for major industrial sabotage and other social reversals. On October 19th, 1928, he attacked the Moscow party leadership for taking part in a 'Right Deviation'.

Between April 23rd and 29th, 1929, the Sixteenth Party Conference met to adopt Stalin's new industrial and agricultural policy. Bukharin was explicitly identified as leader of the right opposition and denounced for his 'non-Marxian theory that the kulaks will grow into socialism, [and] his failure to understand the mechanism of the class struggle under the dictatorship of the proletariat'. The right was now in full disarray; on November 26th, 1929, Bukharin, A.I. Rykov and M.P. Tomsky suffered the humiliation of having to denounce themselves in public, just as the left opposition had done in the recent past. A month later, Stalin announced ominously that the party had moved on from 'a policy of limiting the exploiting activities of the kulaks to a policy of liquidating the kulaks as a class'. It amounted to a declaration of war on the peasantry.

The decade ended with Zinoviev and Kamenev broken, Bukharin discredited, Trotsky in disgrace and exile abroad, and Stalin alone at the helm about to launch his great adventure in social engineering. Still no one imagined the full terrible consequences of what was to follow, least of all the common people and the party masses who saw in him their natural leader and champion. With one rousing voice they joined the Central Committee in celebrating the occasion of Stalin's fiftieth birthday on December 21st 1929, just as his revolution from above was descending upon their heads.

Norman Pereira is Professor of Russian History at Dalhousie University, Canada.

