

The consensus stresses Lenin's importance but we should question what would have happened in Russia in 1917 without him

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Summary: The Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 has often been attributed to the political will of Lenin. This emphasis on Lenin raises interesting questions of methodology: the value of counterfactual history (what would have happened in Lenin's absence?); the role of the individual in history; and the ways in which political calculations influence historical interpretation. While too much emphasis has been placed on Lenin himself in explanations of the overthrow of the Provisional Government in October (since the circumstances were ripe for its overthrow and other individuals had similar ideas to Lenin's), his presence was the major obstacle to the creation of a democratic socialist government after it.

Questions to consider:

- ♦ What is the value of counterfactual questions?
- ♦ What is the influence of the individual in history?
- ♦ In what ways are historical interpretations of 1917 subject to political bias?
- ♦ What were the conditions which made a socialist, not simply a democratic, revolution likely in Russia in 1917?
- ♦ What was Lenin's contribution to the October Revolution, and its outcome?

Counterfactual history

IN HIS *THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION*, the Russian historian Roy Medvedev, recalled the intriguing question raised by the Menshevik émigré, N.V. Valentinov. Describing Lenin's flight from arrest in Finland across the frozen Gulf of Bothnia, in the course of which the ice began to crack, he mused: 'What would have happened if Lenin had drowned ... on 15 December 1907?' Valentinov's question merits further consideration, for two reasons. First, counterfactual history has experienced a popular renaissance recently, prompted by the collection of essays edited by Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History*. In his introduction Ferguson defended its value by distinguishing between the nature of science and history. At an admittedly simplistic level, in science hypotheses are subject to verification by repeated experiment, which results in the elaboration of general laws. Such a method is impossible in history, so that we have to rule out the elaboration of similar general, predictive laws. Historical explanation, he remarked, therefore demands a different approach: 'if we want to say anything about causation in the past without invoking [non-existent] covering laws, we really have to use counterfactuals, if only to test our causal hypotheses.' The range of legitimate counterfactual questions, he added, is limited, with the only plausible ones being those



Lenin as depicted on a contemporary propaganda poster

that, in fact, were considered at the time. Secondly, a counterfactual history of the Russian Revolution, one without Lenin, allows us to address the issue of the role of the individual in history.

The individual in history

Let us begin with the individual, and consider Medvedev's assessment of Lenin's significance. Insisting that he was 'irreplaceable' as leader of the Bolshevik party, his very own 'creation', Medvedev concluded that 'the main role in the 1917 revolution was unquestionably that of Lenin, whose actions left a far greater mark on the twentieth century than Napoleon's did on the nineteenth century'. His conclusion is a familiar one, with close affinities to that proposed by Leon Trotsky. In his famous *History of the Russian Revolution* Trotsky argued that Lenin was not the 'demiurge of the revolutionary process [but] merely entered into a chain of objective historic forces'. He admitted, nevertheless, that without Lenin the Bolshevik party might have remained 'disorientated and split', and so 'might have let slip the revolutionary opportunity for many years'. The implication of Trotsky's argument, as he made explicit elsewhere, is

quite clear: No Lenin, no October Revolution!

As Trotsky's biographer, Isaac Deutscher, pointed out, for a self-professed Marxist his emphasis on Lenin's vital contribution to the October Revolution was 'startling'. His judgement begs the question of precisely how a Marxist is supposed to evaluate the role of the individual in history. Let us return to Marx himself for guidance. As he stated at the outset of *The Communist Manifesto*, '[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'. Classes themselves were rooted in the economic structure of society. As this structure evolved, so new classes arose which 'struggled' to achieve their own ends. In a manner now regarded by many historians as rather simplistic, Marx contended that as capitalism developed to supplant feudalism, so the rising bourgeoisie strove to refashion politics and society in ways conducive to its own interests. Similarly, as capitalism itself matured, so too would the emerging proletariat seek to revolutionise society along socialist lines. For Marx, it was people, fashioned into classes, who made history, rather than individuals. Yet while laying greatest emphasis on economic and class structures as the key determinants of historical change, Marx did concede some influence to the individual. As he wrote in a well-known letter to Kugelmann in April 1871:

World history would indeed be ... of a very mystical nature if 'accidents' played no part ... acceleration and delay are very much dependent upon such 'accidents', including ... the character of the people who first head the movement.

Marx, however, did not develop his ideas on the role of the individual systematically. That task was left to the 'father of Russian Marxism', Georgii Plekhanov, in his influential treatise, *The Role of the Individual in History*. Plekhanov agreed that as men made history then individuals could not help but be part of it. Like Marx he conceded that the personality of an individual could have a 'considerable influence' on events. This concession proved to have little substance, as quickly became clear. Reflecting on the French Revolution, Plekhanov nailed his colours to the mast. Even had Robespierre, the leader of the Jacobin party, died in January 1793, before the onset of the Terror which he largely instigated, 'events would have taken the same course as they did when [he] was alive'. Proceeding to consider the role of Napoleon, Plekhanov drew attention to the 'optical illusion' that distorts any discussion of 'great men' in history. Without denying Napoleon's own 'military genius' Plekhanov insisted that he had been brought to the fore by the social forces of his time which demanded an energetic military ruler to restore order after the Terror. Once Napoleon had assumed this role the way was barred to any other of the talented generals of the revolutionary army. The individual, he concluded, however great, did not shape the course of history after his own designs, but was the servant of social needs, determined ultimately by the development of the productive forces of society.

The politics of historical interpretation

While we do not have to accept Plekhanov's conclusion, it helps us to understand why Deutscher found Trotsky's

TIMELINE

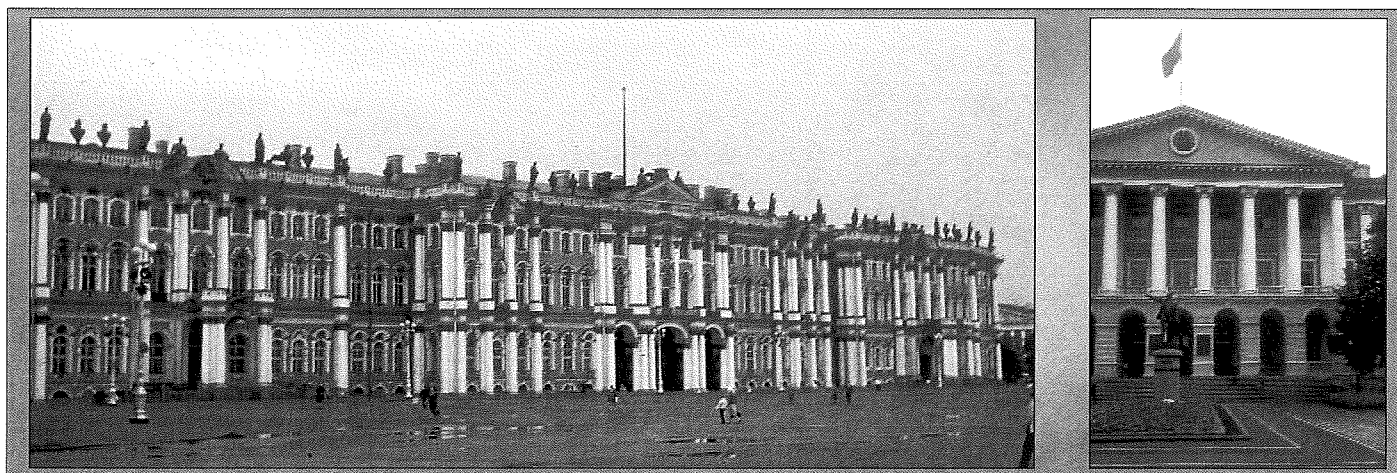
Lenin and the Russian Revolution

1907	Lenin almost falls through the ice, in fleeing arrest
1917	Feb Revolution against autocracy begins
	March Provisional Government established
	Petrograd Soviet, with Mensheviks and SRs in majority, claiming right to supervise actions of Provisional Government: system of Dual Power
	April Lenin returns and delivers April Theses
	May Mensheviks and SRs enter PG as junior partners in coalition
	June Military offensive ends in rout
	July Martov and Left SRs support transfer of power to Soviets
	Aug General Kornilov launches counter-revolutionary offensive
	Sept Bolshevik majorities in Moscow and Petrograd Soviets
	Lenin calls for Bolsheviks to take power
	24-5 Oct Bolshevik seizure of power begins and frustrates formation of all-Socialist government

emphasis on the crucial role of Lenin in 1917 to be surprising. It is less surprising, however, if we consider the possible motivations underlying Trotsky's depiction. It was not simply, as Deutscher suggested, a reaction to the growing omniscience of Stalin, the emergence of what became known as the 'cult of the personality', to which Trotsky responded with a cult of Lenin. It also had a more calculated political purpose. Having elevated Lenin to the position of demigod, he then portrayed himself as his rightful successor, in the (vain) hope of mobilising support within the Communist party in his struggle against Stalin.

Trotsky's evaluation of Lenin has been reflected in much writing on 1917. One still influential interpretation posits that without Lenin, the Bolshevik party would not have been formed. Without its leadership the Russian workers would have failed to acquire the revolutionary consciousness necessary to carry out the revolution. Without Lenin's *April Theses*, in which he insisted that the democratic February Revolution be transformed into one for socialism, the Bolsheviks would have failed to rearm themselves ideologically in the spring of 1917. On the contrary, they would have followed in the wake of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) who supported the newly-formed Provisional Government. Without Lenin, the party leadership would not have mustered up the courage to strike for power in October. Without Lenin's personal intervention on the night of 24-5 October the attempt to seize power would have run out of steam. In other words, Lenin was the principal driving force behind the October Revolution.

Apart from being simplistic, a variation on what, in his famous book, *What Is History?*, E.H. Carr described as the bad King John theory of history, this emphasis on Lenin has political implications. For long in the West, and in Russia itself after the collapse of Communism in 1991,



Landmarks of Lenin's October Revolution. The Winter Palace, in which the Provisional Government were detained on the night of the revolution (left) and the Smolny, formerly a girls' school, the Soviet headquarters in which the Military Revolutionary Committee met (right)

Lenin has been cast as the evil mastermind who subverted the democratic potential of the February Revolution and imposed his own malignant authority on Russia. It also minimises the 'historic forces' to which Trotsky also alluded. If Lenin had been a German, it is probable that he would have remained a marginal, if still interesting, figure in the history of European Marxism. His revolutionary will notwithstanding, conditions in Germany at the end of the First World War were not propitious for a Bolshevik type revolution: most German workers were reformist, not revolutionary; nor were the peasants who had their own land; the middle classes were strong and an obstacle to radical revolution; the Army (enough of it) remained intact and prepared to crush Bolshevism in Germany; and the war, the major source of tensions, ended as the German Revolution spread in November 1918. As Karl Radek, a Bolshevik himself wryly remarked, revolution fitted Germany like a saddle fitted a cow! Just as Hitler's rise to power can be understood only by reference to conditions within Germany in the early 1930s, as Joachim Fest argued in his monumental biography, so too Lenin's success was predicated upon the situation within Russia in 1917.

The February Revolution in perspective

Let us begin by examining the 'historic forces' that led to the Russian Revolutions of 1917, first, the February Revolution and the collapse of the autocracy, in which Lenin and other revolutionary intellectuals played little part. Before the outbreak of the First World War the autocracy faced mounting socio-political challenges. Many Liberal politicians had come, reluctantly, to contemplate revolution as the only means to establish constitutional government in Russia as Nicholas II took back the modest political concessions that he had been forced to make at the height of the 1905 Revolution. The agrarian reforms introduced between 1906 and 1911 by the Prime Minister, Petr Stolypin, had failed to mollify most peasants. In fact, their threat to the traditional peasant communal way of living had precipitated a mounting wave of disturbances in the countryside before 1914. The workers had engaged in a series of increasingly radical strikes, pursuing not simply economic improvement but the overthrow of the autocracy that had suppressed them, on occasion with much bloodshed, as witnessed in the mas-

sacre of strikers on the Lena gold fields in Siberia in April 1912. Whether the autocracy would have succumbed to these challenges is doubtful, especially as the Army remained loyal in 1914.

The test of war, however, was too much for the autocracy to bear. Repeated defeats, massive human losses and a marked deterioration of economic conditions, especially in the towns and cities, provoked universal opposition against a regime increasingly seen as incapable and inefficient. Crucially, the government now lost the support of its major prop, the Army. When a workers' strike in Petrograd in late February 1917 rapidly evolved into a revolutionary assault, there was nothing left to save the autocracy. The Petrograd garrison swiftly went over to the side of the insurgents, while the High Command delayed dispatching loyal troops to restore order. By then it agreed with the Liberal politicians that the only way to salvage Russia's war effort was a palace revolution, to ditch Nicholas and transform the country into a constitutional monarchy, which would be able to mobilise the people in support of the war. The abdication of Nicholas and the emergence of a democratic republic came as a surprise, but one of no great import as the new Provisional Government (PG) remained committed to prosecuting the war to a victorious conclusion.

From February to October

However, the hopes of the Liberals and Russia's generals came to naught. The February Revolution had also seen the formation of a system of Soviets (councils), most importantly the Petrograd Soviet, representing the forces of revolution from below, the workers, sailors and soldiers, and also the peasants. Its self-appointed task was to watch over the PG, to ensure it carried out democratic reform and continued the war simply to defend the gains of the Revolution until a just, non-annexationist peace was negotiated. This was the system known as Dual Power. It had made Russia the freest country in the world, as Lenin himself conceded, but achieved little else. Rather than pursuing peace the PG agreed to an ill thought out offensive in June that quickly turned into a rout; it failed to stem the growth of unemployment, inflation and food shortages; and it did nothing to satisfy the demands of the overwhelming peasant majority for land. Its rapidly

declining credibility was fatally undermined by its failure to prevent General Lavr Kornilov's attempted counter-revolutionary coup in August. So, too, was that of the Mensheviks and SRs, who had entered the PG, as junior partners, on 5 May. In these circumstances it is little wonder that the 'masses' turned to those offering more radical solutions.

The Bolshevik party offered 'peace, bread and land', to be achieved by the transfer of power to the Soviets. What is often overlooked in accounts of 1917 is that it was not alone. During 1917 many Mensheviks and SRs also had begun to rearm themselves. Since the early summer Julius Martov and his fellow Left Mensheviks had urged that a coalition socialist government (tantamount to Soviet power) be formed, to tackle the problems of war, inflation and food shortages, and land reform. A rapidly growing faction of Left SRs had been expelled from the SR party in September for arguing in similar vein. Belatedly, on 24 October, as the delegates to the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets began to convene in Petrograd, Martov won over a majority of Mensheviks to support his strategy. For an instant the possibility existed that the Congress would have deposed the bankrupt PG and taken power into its own hands. A democratic socialist government would have been formed, a coalition of Mensheviks and Left Socialist Revolutionaries. Moderate Bolsheviks, led by Lev Kamenev and Grigorii Zinoviev who opposed a solely Bolshevik seizure of power on the grounds that it would end in the victory of counter-revolution, apparently were ready to abandon Lenin and join it. Arguably, it would have secured the support of the majority of ordinary people. It was too late. By then, cajoled by Lenin, the Bolsheviks had begun to strike for power.

Lenin's impact on 1917

Now we must return to Lenin. His personal authority and persuasive logic certainly helped to convince an initially reluctant party leadership to accept his *April Theses*. Yet Lenin was not an isolated figure, as many worker Bolsheviks had called for a similar policy since February.

So, too, had radical émigré Bolsheviks, such as Bukharin, who only returned to Russia after Lenin. One might surmise that the Bolshevik party would have rearmed itself, even in Lenin's absence, if not as early as April. Later, when the Bolsheviks had gained majorities in the influential Moscow and Petrograd Soviets in early September and he demanded that the party transfer power into the hands of the Soviets, again he was not alone. In many urban Soviets across Russia, local Bolsheviks had already done so. His real perspicacity lay in his grasp of the critical importance of the peasants, whom he won over, or neutralised, by prevailing upon the party to accept a policy of land division. However, his unwavering opposition to any compromises with other socialists, his success in imposing his views that the party take power independently: these were key factors in stymieing the formation of a democratic socialist government in October. The right wing Mensheviks and SRs deserted in the Second Congress of Soviets in protest at Bolshevik actions. Without denying their own stubbornness, his continued intransigence was the main stumbling block to the creation of such a government. This, conceivably, was his

Words and concepts to note

Autocracy: the system of government in Imperial Russia, with absolute power concentrated in the hands of the Tsar.

Cult of the personality: the glorification of Stalin's personal rule

Demiurge: the creator.

Jacobin: radical revolutionary, originally member of Jacobin club during French Revolution.

Mensheviks: moderate members of the Russian Social Democratic Labour party opposed to Lenin.

Provisional Government: unelected liberal democratic government which replaced autocracy after February Revolution.

Reformism: variant of socialism which denied need for revolution.

Socialist Revolutionaries: members of peasant socialist party.

Soviets: councils, elected by workers, peasants, sailors or soldiers.

major personal contribution, one which hi-jacked the democratic potential of 1917 and was confirmed by his decision to disperse the elected All-Russian Constituent Assembly in January 1918.

Conclusion

If Lenin had died in 1907 it is possible that history would have proceeded differently. Whether the formation in his absence of a democratic socialist government would have spared revolutionary Russia from its subsequent trials and tribulations is a moot point. There are good reasons to doubt if it would have escaped the Draconian peace of Brest-Litovsk imposed by the Germans in March 1918, or the brutal Civil War, given the unremitting hostility of the old landlords, industrialists and generals to anything smacking of democracy, let alone socialism. The danger of counter-revolution arguably would have driven even a coalition socialist government to adopt dictatorial measures to survive. Even had democratic socialism been restored in Russia thereafter, it still would have had to contend with the problems of the country's backwardness and vulnerability in a hostile world of advanced imperialist rivals in the 1920s and 1930s. Whether the only solution to these problems was Stalinism continues to divide historians. Carr, in the preface to the second edition of *What Is History?*, speculated that had Lenin lived beyond 1924 at least some of the massive human suffering brought about by Stalin would have been avoided. To answer this question, however, requires another counterfactual history.

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