

LENIN'S ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES

Historians have long pondered over how a small minority party could have succeeded in obtaining and preserving its power in Russia and subsequently the Soviet Union. Among the critical factors cited are the popularity of the Bolsheviks in the autumn of 1917, the fact that they made promises that appealed to the broader population, the association of their rivals (the Mensheviks and SRs) with the government, and the unwillingness of the latter two parties to use the Soviet as a means to take power for themselves. This book has argued that the revolution very much belonged to Lenin even though he did not personally play an active role in the events of 7 November. It also maintains that the Bolsheviks in opposition were a very different party from the Bolsheviks in power. Prior to the November Revolution they were singularly attuned to the mood of the populace. Lenin in particular had an acute sense of timing, hence his constant spate of letters to the Bolshevik Central Committee in an effort to ensure that the moment did not pass.

In November 1917 the Provisional Government was on its last legs. Elections to the Constituent Assembly would presumably have gone ahead anyway, and it is highly unlikely that Kerensky could have retained his position as premier. The Bolsheviks also had a majority in both the Moscow and Petrograd soviets by this time. They could have played a decisive role in any socialist coalition government that might have been formed. However, Lenin never had any intention of sharing power. The increasing bureaucracy in the party was a direct consequence of the leader's overwhelming desire to rule alone and to remain in power, however unpopular they might have become. Logically a socialist revolution could not be reversed. Yet this was a socialist revolution that excluded the majority of socialists from a voice in decision-making. The first signs of what the future held were the Bolsheviks' arrogance and unyielding attitude in the Second Congress of Soviets and the January 1918 dissolution of the Constituent Assembly.

It could be argued that the outbreak of the civil war created the unity in the country that permitted the Bolsheviks to stay in office, that they could pose as defenders of the revolution in a struggle against the class enemy.

There is evidence to suggest, however, that the civil war itself was a direct result of Lenin's manoeuvring. Just as the Bolsheviks had ample opportunities to work alongside or share government with the other socialist parties, so also there were chances for them to continue in some form the alliance with the powers of the Entente. Germany had not only imposed a ruthless treaty on Soviet Russia, it had flagrantly interfered in the politics of former parts of the Russian Empire. In many respects, the war with Germany had not ended at Brest-Litovsk. At various stages in 1917-18, however, Lenin's relationship with the Germans was at best ambiguous. The Germans enabled him to return to Russia to foment revolution. It was Lenin who insisted on two occasions that German demands at Brest-Litovsk must be met; and it was Lenin again who preferred to make a deal with the Germans in May 1918 rather than work with the Entente, rendering the foreign armies protecting Russian military bases *ipso facto* hostile elements.

Did Lenin have a choice? The Bolsheviks after all faced almost overwhelming problems in 1918. The key factor was that in the long term, the democratic governments of the Entente could hardly have accepted the Bolsheviks as legitimate, let alone as allies. Winston Churchill was the most outspoken of western politicians, but there were many who abhorred the coming to power of a Marxist party. As the civil war demonstrated, the West would have preferred to see military dictatorship in Russia than Lenin's party in power. The Germans, on the other hand, might be content to use Ukraine as a supply base in collusion with a weak Russian government as long as the war continued. In May 1918 a defeat for Germany on the western front within six months looked improbable. From the Bolsheviks' perspective, on the other hand, a revolution in Germany was inevitable. Lenin and Trotsky felt that they could play for time in the knowledge that workers' revolutions would shortly occur throughout Europe. Russia would not be left alone as the sole socialist state.

After the failure of the uprisings in Berlin, Munich and Hungary, and the refusal of the Polish workers to support Tukhachevsky's assault on Warsaw in 1920, the goal of exporting the revolution had to be shelved. Instead, power at home needed to be consolidated through the ruthless suppression of internal enemies. In fact this process had begun early in 1918. At the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, which introduced the New Economic Policy, a decree was also issued to ban factionalism in the party ranks. This decree was used thereafter to crack down on any wavering or dissension from the official party line. The Cheka already had its own empire and was to appear in new forms throughout the Soviet period. In addition, the ranks of officialdom had swelled to gross proportions. The Bolsheviks put the population into uniforms and gave them tasks.

In the countryside there had never been solid support for the Bolsheviks. The peasants were willing to tolerate a party that allowed them to

divide up the land, but in the period 1918-21 they were themselves divided according to property, or whether they hired labour and could be categorized as kulaks. Once again, Lenin's party had a choice. It could have maintained the worker-peasant alliance that had been proclaimed. Instead it chose to rely on the worker while turning viciously on the peasant. Under War Communism the entire economy collapsed, and labour mobilization tactics deprived the Bolsheviks of key support in the cities, and at military and naval bases. The civil war had been won, but the costs had been horrendous and the suffering acute. Consequently, March 1921 constituted a temporary truce in the Bolsheviks' battle in the countryside. Whether it would have continued had Lenin remained in good health will always be a moot point.

Bolsheviks in power individually were also very different from Bolsheviks in opposition. The transformation from revolutionary to administrator or minister was almost impossible for some. Trotsky, for example, enjoyed his finest moments during times of crisis, when he could rally people with a speech or dash from one point to another. As a politician manoeuvring for power, he was (as Lenin remarked) clueless [Doc. 21]. Zinoviev and Kamenev had boldly snuck to their principles at critical times in 1917, opposing Lenin when they felt he was being too impetuous. By the summer of 1918 they had become sycophantic worshippers, only too anxious to develop a Lenin cult while their leader was still alive. This would grow to monstrous proportions after Lenin's death, but it was in place well before January 1924. The natural administrators, like Sverdlov (who died prematurely) and Stalin, thus came to the fore, and their path was made smoother by the party's tight discipline and centralization.

Lenin himself was the chief architect of this system. At various times he was prepared to take the most drastic punitive measures, to make an example of class enemies, or to order mass executions when milder instructions would have made little difference to the outcome. One such event was the execution of the Romanov family on 17 July 1918. In May 1918 Nikolay and Aleksandra had been moved to a house in Yekaterinburg. The Bolshevik leaders were debating whether to put the former tsar on trial - Trotsky envisaged himself in the role of prosecutor. Two months later it seemed that the city would be captured by the Whites and the Czech Corps. On the instructions of Yakov Yurovsky, a member of the Cheka who was in charge of the royal prisoners, the entire family was taken down to the cellar of the house and executed. Some of the children had to be bayoneted afterward. They were then taken to a disused mine shaft, soaked in acid and burned. It is now clear that this senseless execution was ordered by Lenin himself [68]. The tsar personally may have been considered a threat, though none of the White leaders sought to reinstall him in power. The children, however, and their bodyguards and servants, were completely innocent.

The massacre of the royal family was a typical indicator of the sort of ruler Lenin had become. This process did not begin in 1902, when he demanded a highly disciplined and centralized party. Lenin's pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?* remains a masterpiece of the strategy by which the party could take power, but it did not necessarily predetermine how the party would govern once in power. It revealed a flexibility within Marxism that would serve Lenin well. However, at every stage after the revolution, Lenin exhibited a chilling ruthlessness. Arguably it kept him in power, but it is also conceivable that much of it was unwarranted. Even after November 1917, there was a brief period when it appeared that some of the more utopian goals of socialism might be implemented. All these hopes – and some were expressed in the resolution of the Kronstadt sailors in March 1921 – were to be dashed over the next few years. By December 1922, when Lenin had the second stroke that curtailed his active participation in public life, the nature of the new state, the USSR, was already plain to see.

Nonetheless, the Russian Revolution continues to elicit some fervour and even romantic notions. At the time of writing there are plans to resurrect statues of Lenin and Stalin in different parts of Russia, and even to restore the statue of the first head of the Cheka, Feliks Dzerzhinsky, in the square outside the Lubyanka building in Moscow. In Moscow, Kyiv and Minsk (the latter two now capitals of independent countries), Communists remain a powerful force in public life. The day of revolution, 7 November, is seen as a time of hope, of ideas, of revolutionary activity, and of great leadership. The image of Lenin as a deity was attacked bitterly in the late Soviet period. Lenin's works, which made up an obligatory corner of every bookstore, were removed. And yet his image remains in Russia. It will not be erased by the end of the twentieth century. This small and shambling badly dressed figure, whose features were barely known to the Russian public until Fanya Kaplan tried to assassinate him, continues to fascinate statespersons, scholars and tourists alike. The democratic government of Boris Yeltsin could not take the ultimate step of removing Lenin's body from the mausoleum inside the Kremlin walls.

In one sense, those who feel that statues of Lenin should remain on display are right: 1917 was an epochal year for Russia, and there were times when Lenin and his party really did embody the feelings and hopes of the people, particularly the volatile masses in Petrograd and Moscow. The monarchy had fallen, but nothing stable had replaced it. The masses wanted a government that would follow their wishes, end the war, and provide them with food and land. The Bolsheviks were the only party that agreed to and fulfilled these wishes in any form. Ultimately, then, perhaps they failed to live up to early expectations because they were seduced by power. Thereafter everything that Lenin did was to ensure that his party remained the government, that all socialist rivals were excluded and in many cases out-

lawed. A siege mentality was developed of a state surrounded by enemies and bolstered by the real (somewhat half-hearted, especially in the case of the French and Americans) intervention of foreign powers on land that had formerly belonged to Russia. Only through repression and force could Lenin's party stay in office and these were the main characteristics of the early Soviet regime.